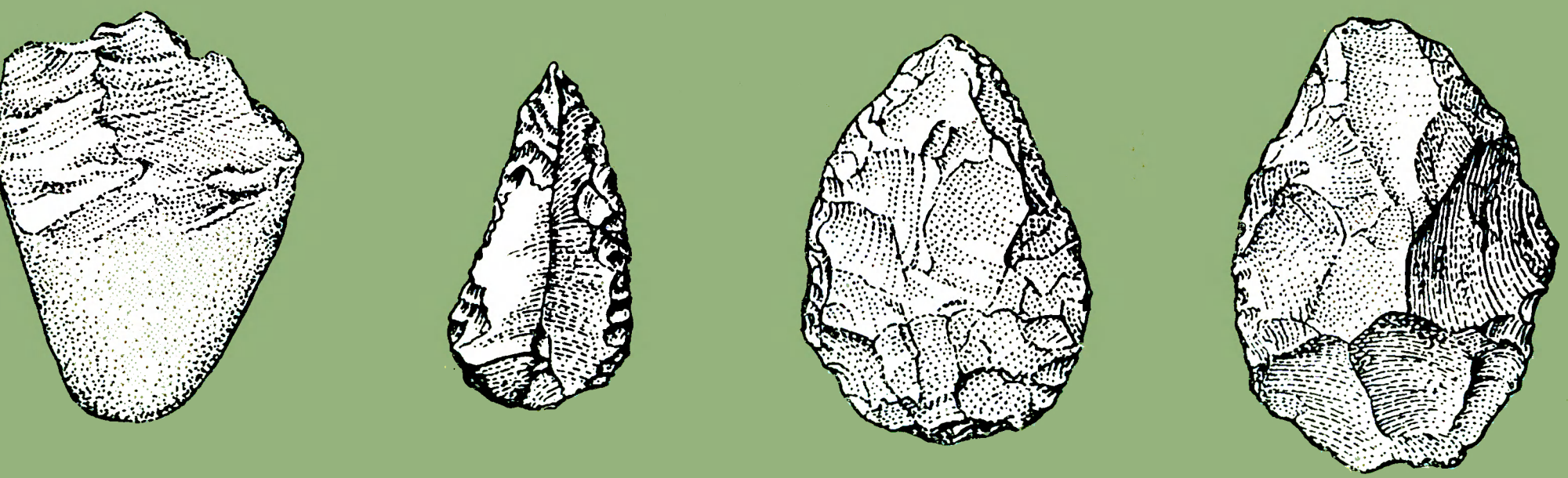

THEY LIVED LIKE THIS IN THE OLD STONE AGE

Marie Neurath & Muriel Turner

They lived like this in
THE OLD STONE AGE

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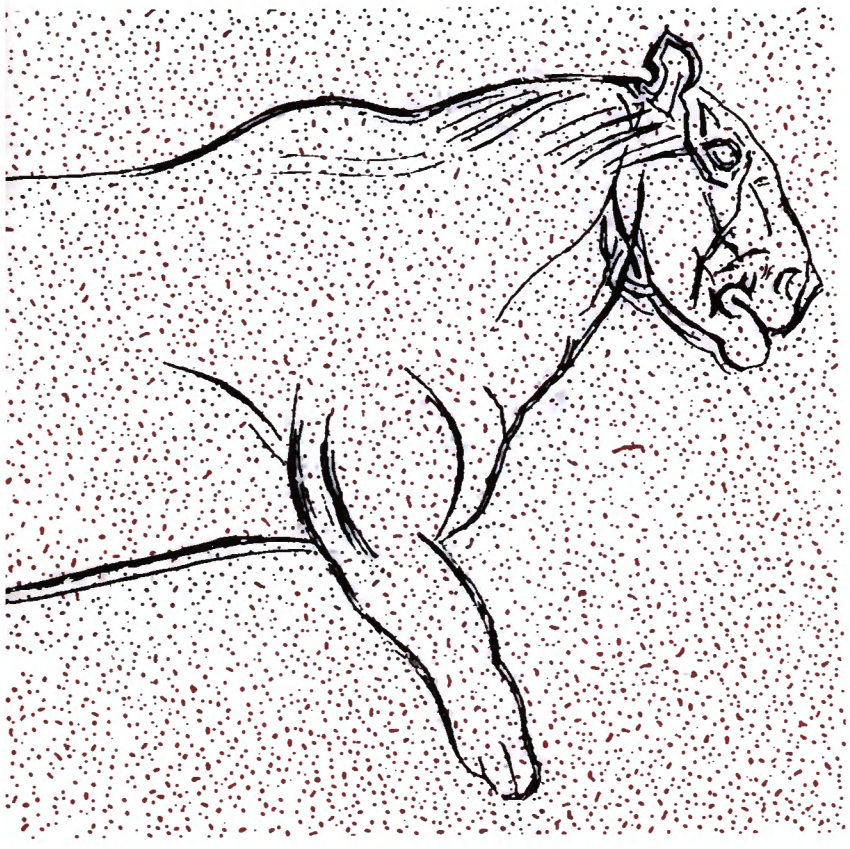
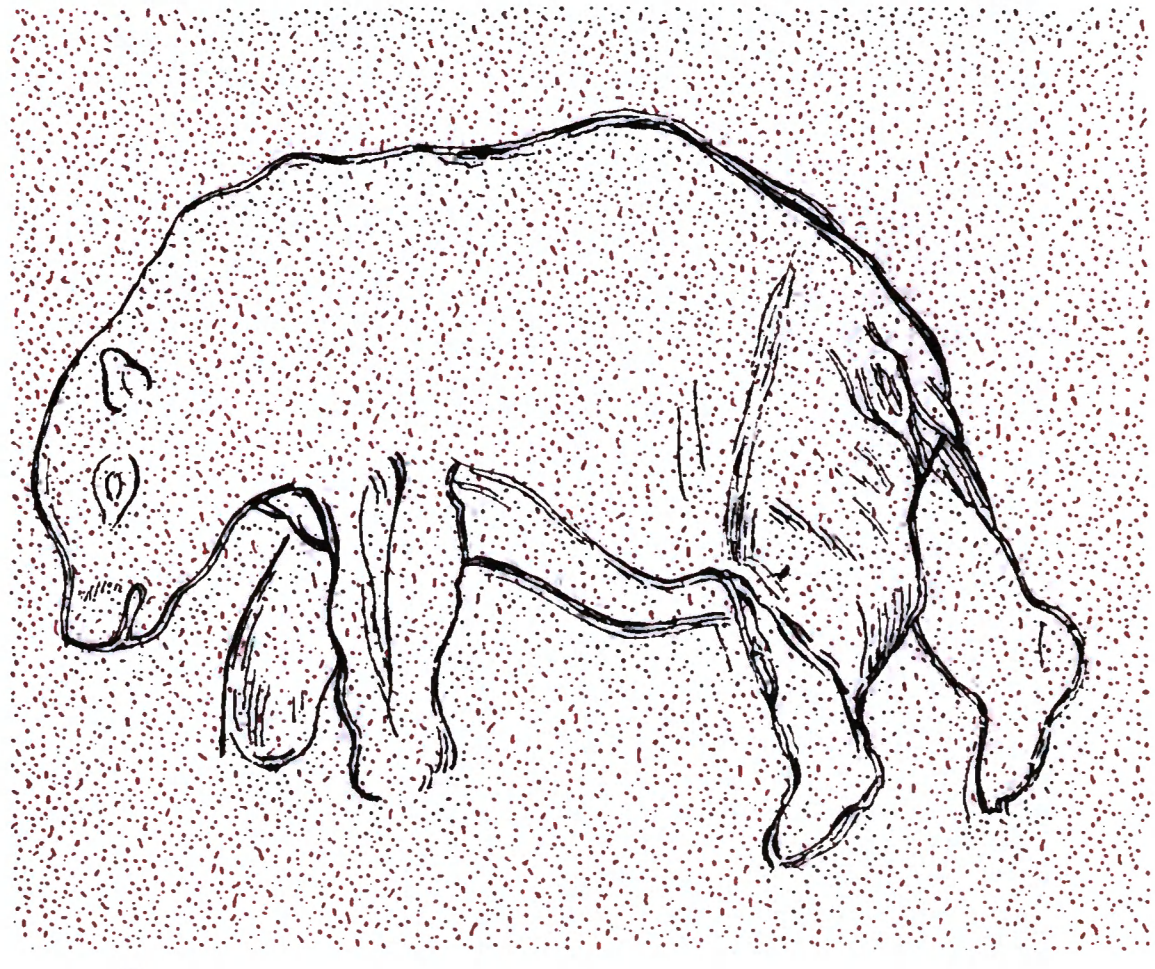
THE OLD STONE AGE

Since its beginnings, the earth has gone through many changes, in its crust and rocks, its surface of oceans and continents, its atmosphere and climate, and its population of animals and plants. For most of its existence, there were no men on earth. When they first appeared, they were still different from us. But they walked upright on two feet and had their hands free to grasp and pick fruits, nuts and other things.



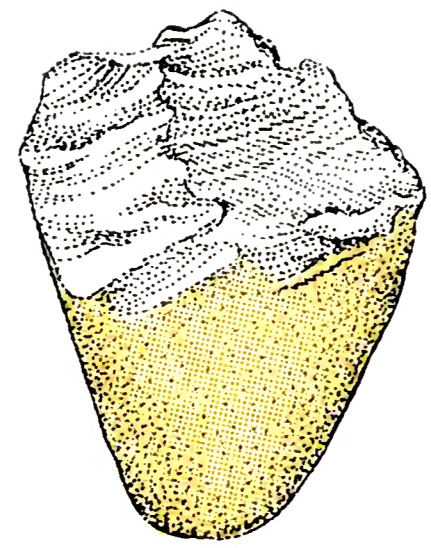
There were very few of them. But there were many animals, some of them fierce and dangerous. Against lions and bears, men were helpless; they were not strong enough to fight them nor swift enough to run away.



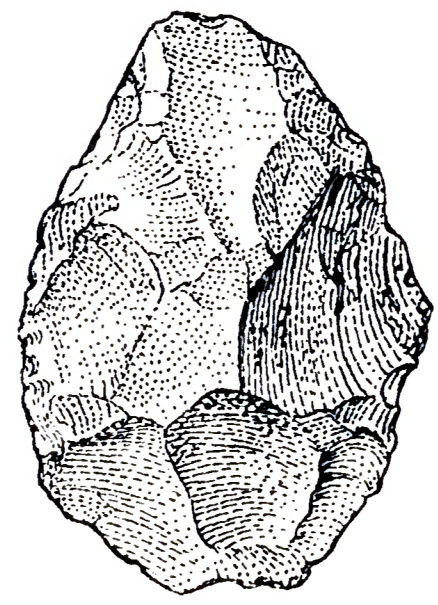
But today there are many more men on earth than there are lions and bears. How can this be explained?

In one way man was better equipped than any animal; he had a better brain. He could watch and learn and outwit the stronger beasts.

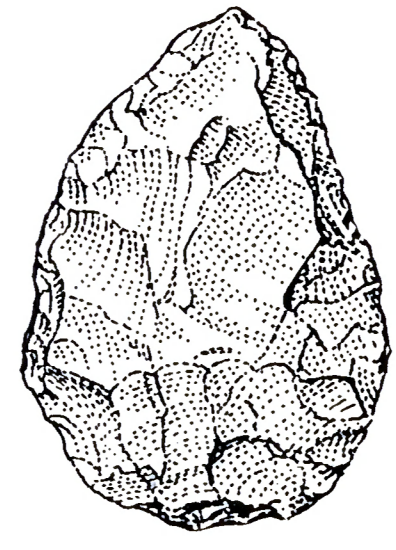
Though man could not improve his body, he could make the best possible use of it. As his fingernails were not strong enough for cutting and scratching, he took stones and sticks in his hands: he used tools.



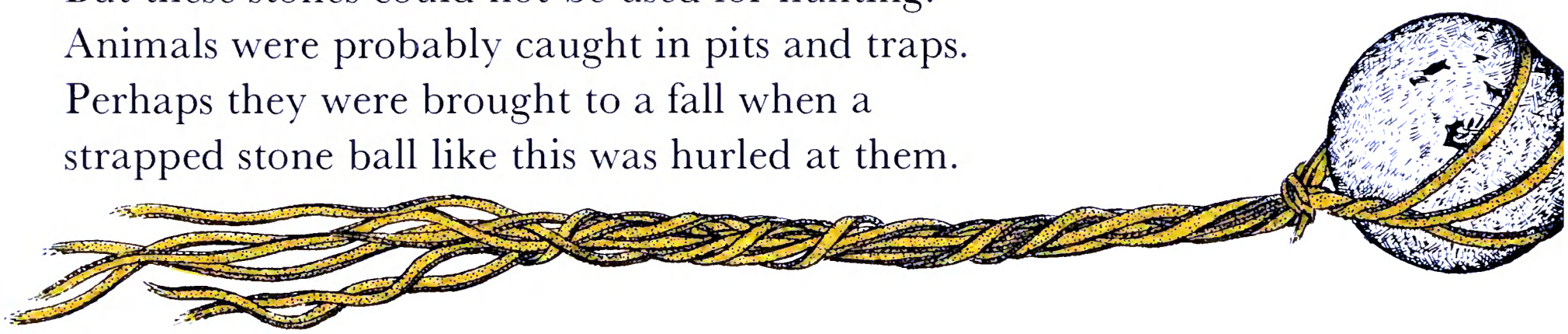
In the beginning, man's tools were mainly of stone; that is why this era is called the Stone Age. Often stones can be found which had got crushed, and had naturally sharp edges. These may have been the first tools man used. But then he learned to produce sharper edges by hitting stones together, and in time he learned to hit with greater effect.



But he learned very slowly, and it took hundreds of thousands of years for the changes which the pictures on this page show to take place. Heaps of flaked stones have been found, though there were few men who made and used them. This is because many of the split stones were not good enough for use and were thrown away. Also, the good ones did not last long and soon had to be replaced.

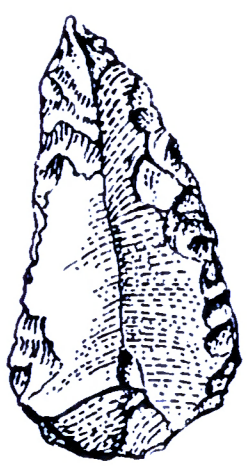


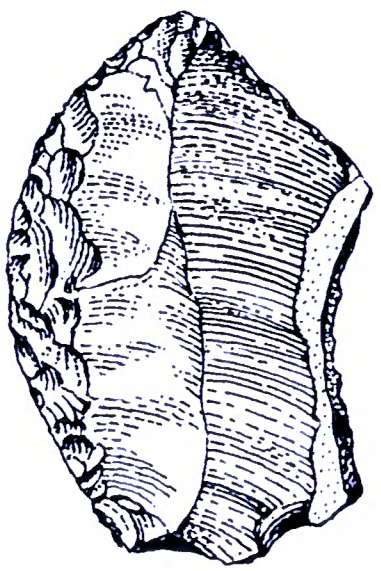
Men could live only where there was fresh water. Often they stayed near waterholes or rivers. Like lions, they watched animals approach to drink. Like lions, they waited to catch, kill and eat the animals. Man had learned that, besides fruits and roots, meat is good to eat. Sharp stones were used to scrape the meat from the skins, to open bones and skulls to get at the marrow and the brain for tasty meals. But these stones could not be used for hunting. Animals were probably caught in pits and traps. Perhaps they were brought to a fall when a strapped stone ball like this was hurled at them.



In addition, wooden throwing sticks were used. Some made of yew wood have been found, with their points hardened by fire.

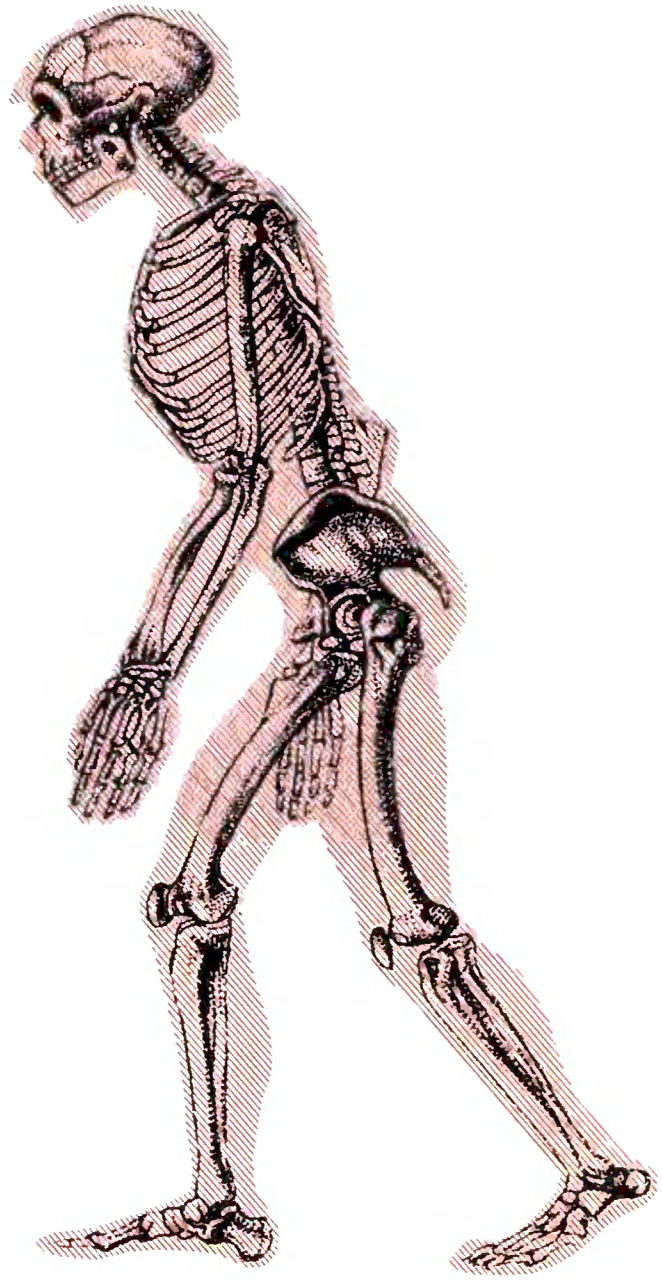
Charred bits of bone and wood show that man used fire in very early times. He may have found out that fire is good to frighten fierce animals away, to heat, to make light with torches, and perhaps also to cook.



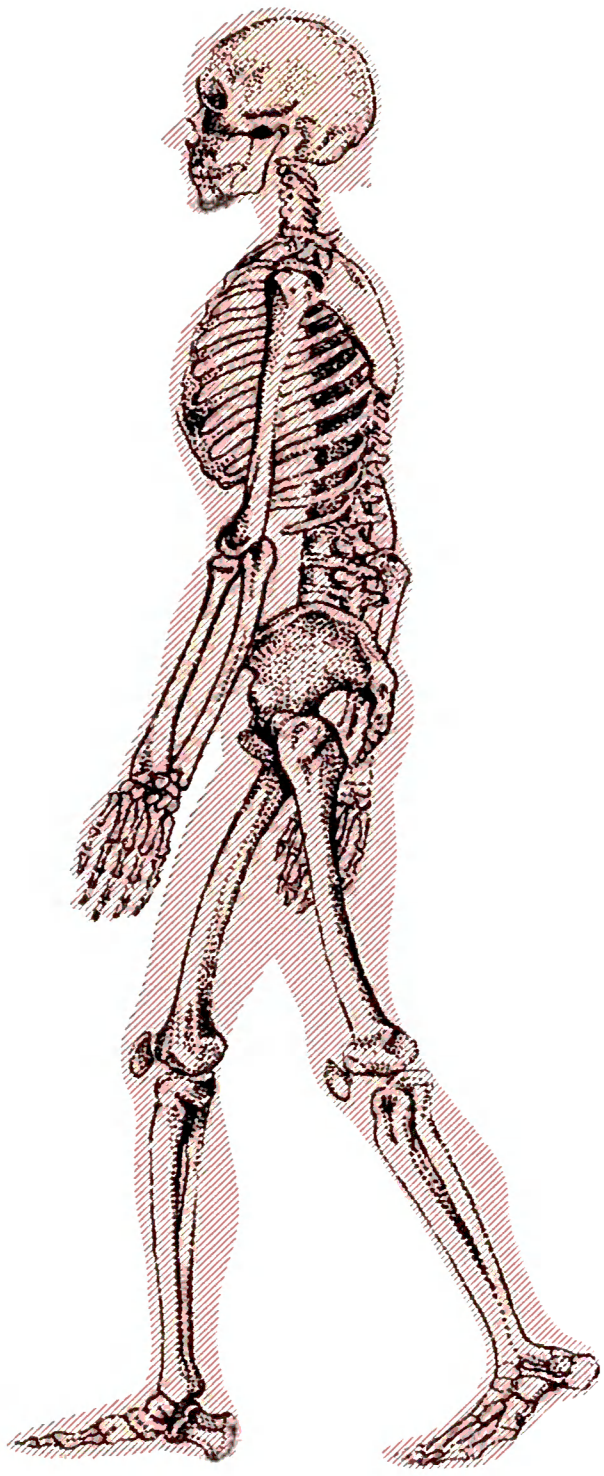


With better meals, man became stronger and healthier. He made better tools for various uses, and gave them more effective edges.

The oldest traces of man have been found in warm parts of the earth. There the small family groups lived without changing much, for many thousands of years. They may have wandered about in the warm areas of Africa and Asia.
They were still rather different from us: smaller, and bent forward when walking. They had heavy ridges of bone over their eyes, and receding chins. They spoke to each other. But the muscles around their tongues were rather clumsy – they probably made fewer sounds than we do.

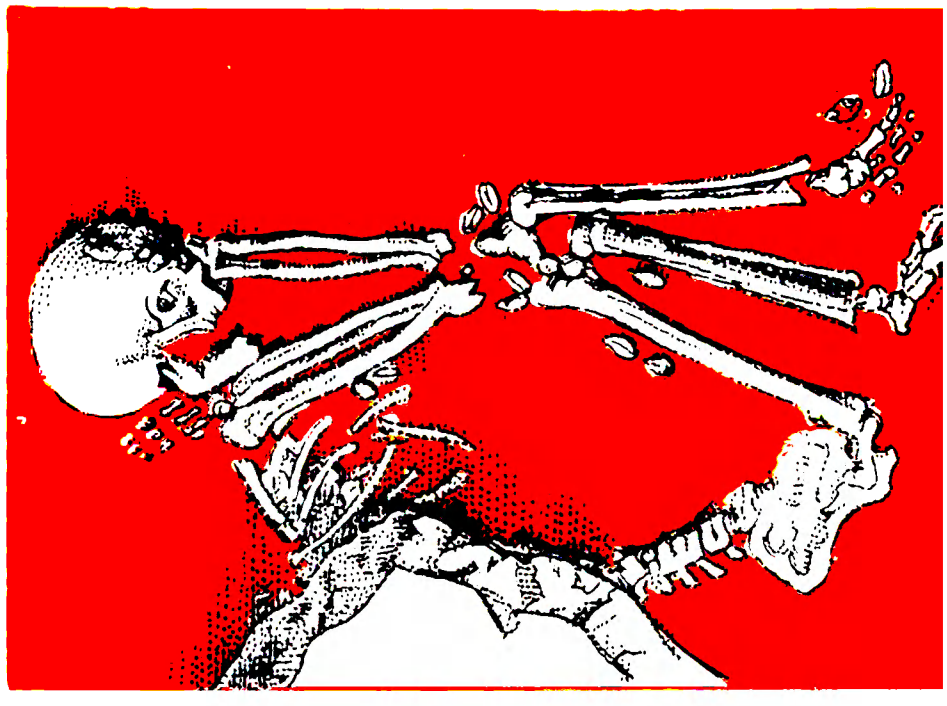


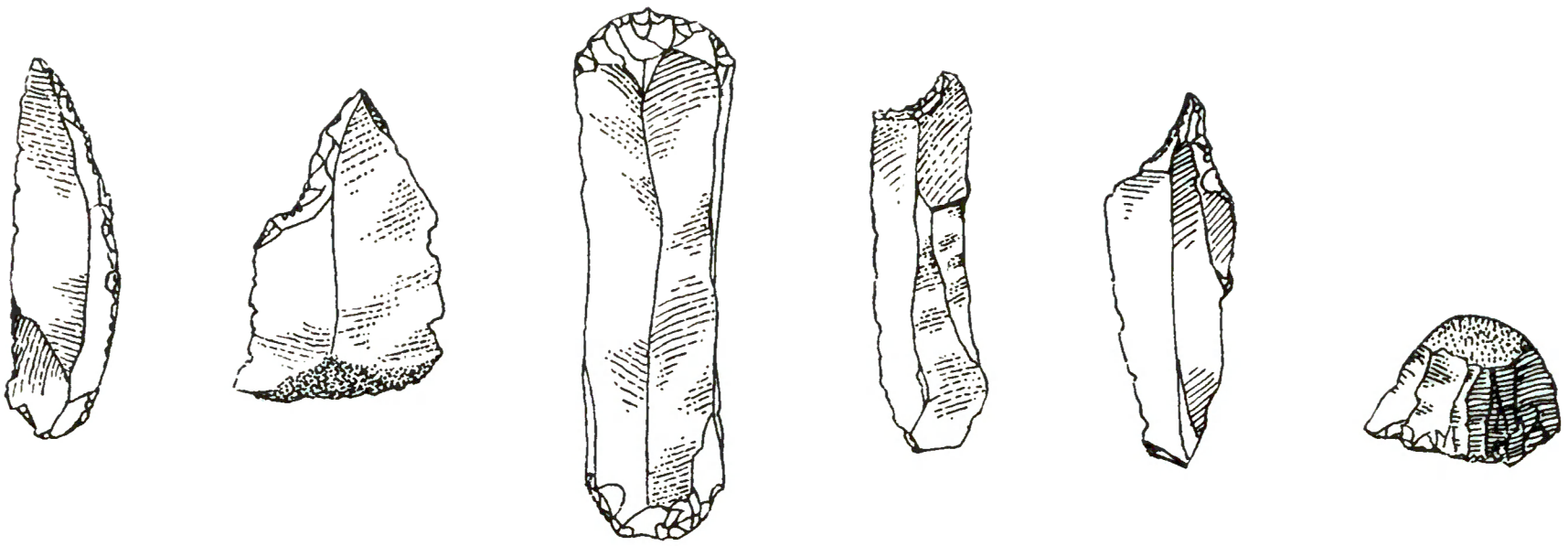
Enough bones have been found of some ancient men to reconstruct their bodies so that we can get an impression of how these men looked. But they were not all alike, and in different parts of the world they developed in different ways.



In several areas with a warm climate, different types of taller and stronger men grew up in the course of time. They had domed skulls and larger, finer brains, and they were able to speak better. These people adapted themselves to life in all climates, and they began to explore the whole earth. These new people were more carefully buried, stretched out to their full length or in a crouching position as shown below. From their bones we know that they were taller and more erect than the earlier inhabitants of the earth. They are our ancestors, and we are like them.

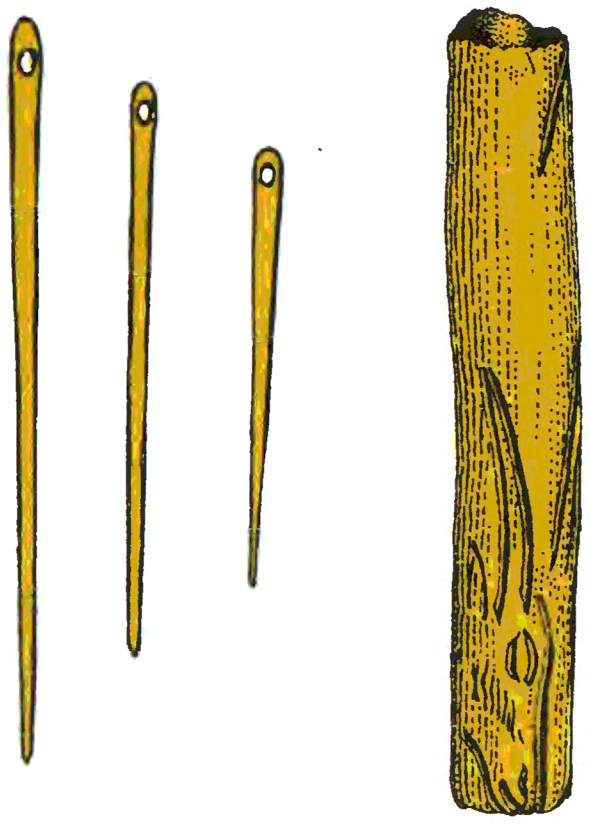
More than anywhere else, burials and other remains have been found and investigated in Europe. Here the new people arrived about 35,000 years ago, and they stayed through all changes of climate, even when much of the land was covered with ice. They used furs as clothes and caves for shelter.





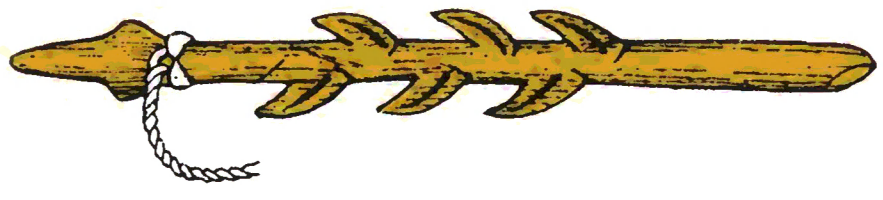
These intelligent men made better tools than their forerunners, of more varying shapes for more various uses. There were knives with curved edges, sharp points, scraping tools with sharp round ends, other scrapers which were curved inwards and used to shave shafts, piercers, and scrapers which could be pressed down on a skin and pushed along.

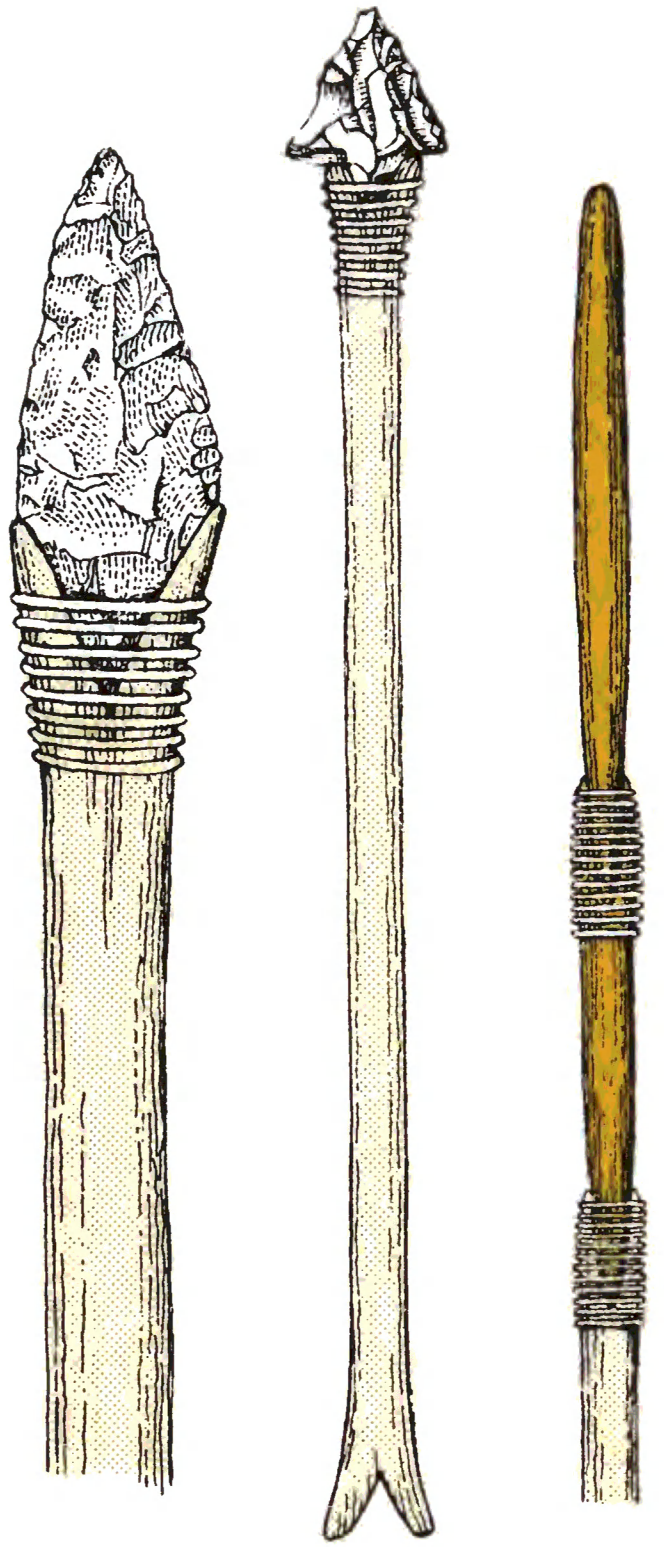
Besides the tools made of stone, there were now others made of bone. Many needles have been found, with holes for a thread, and even needle cases to hold an assortment of different sizes. Some of the stone tools above were used to make such needles and their eyes.



New ideas came to these people much more easily. As they had more things at their disposal, they probably used more words to name them, and with refined speaking their imagination and power of invention must have grown.

They thought of combinations of tools for new forms which helped them to become better hunters. They put sharp stone or bone heads to wooden staffs so that the spears they threw against their prey would penetrate. They also had harpoons made of bone and attached strings to them so that they could retrieve them with the caught fish.





They had spearthrowers which increased the throwing power of their arms.

The older inhabitants of Europe were no match for these newcomers. They gradually disappeared. Either they died out, or they mixed with the newcomers, and the children resembled more and more the new type.

In many caves, generation after generation of people has lived and left behind layers of remains: tools, bones of animals they have eaten, charred wood from fires, and other things. By digging down into these layers, we find out about earlier periods; by studying the changes from the bottom to the top, we can discover the developments in the life of the cave dwellers.

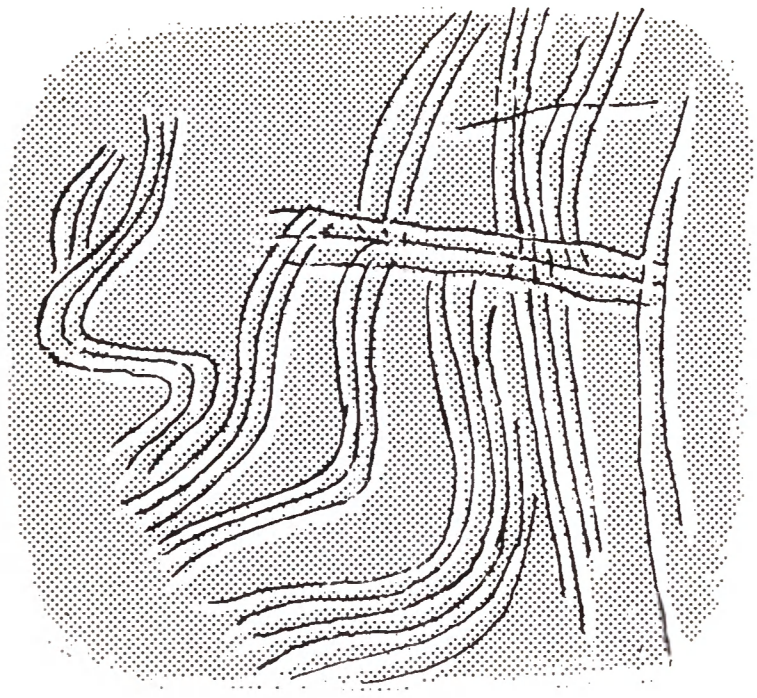
But there is something else which tells us of these people: in areas which are now the south of France and the north of Spain, they began to make pictures. It was a great surprise when, about a hundred years ago, the first of the Old Stone Age paintings were discovered. Since then, much about their history has been found out. How did it all start?

From early times, men have decorated themselves. They have sprayed paint on their body, probably through hollow bones. They used a fine powder of red ochre, which stuck to their skin if they first greased it.

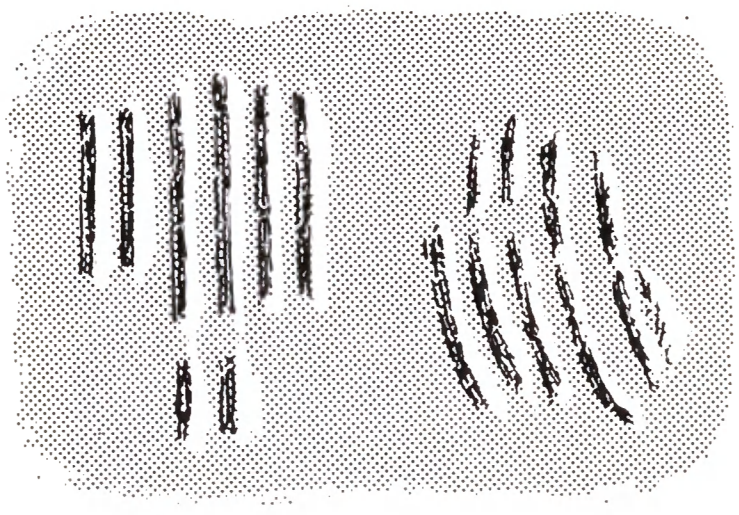
Perhaps, somebody may have held his hand against a wall when spraying and found that a ghost picture of the hand, with colour around, was left behind. When he recognised and copied it he found that he could paint a picture. When he then pressed a hand wet with greasy paint against a wall, he made a coloured picture of the hand itself.

He may also have noticed his own footprints in wet soil – some of them have become hard and have been preserved to the present day. That may have given him the idea of painting foot-like shapes as in the picture on the right.

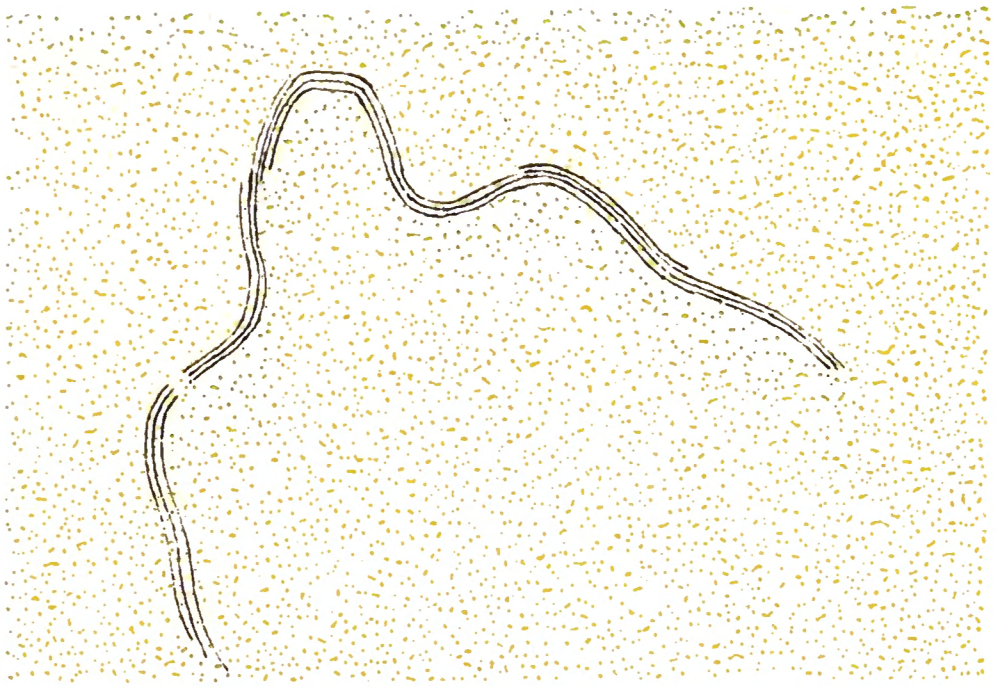
As we do today, people of those times may have drawn lines with their fingers in the sand. Some of these doodles can still be seen, deep down in caves. These caves were formed, when it became warmer after a cold period, by underground rivers, full of water from melting snow. When the rivers shrank, a layer of wet clay was left behind on the cave walls.

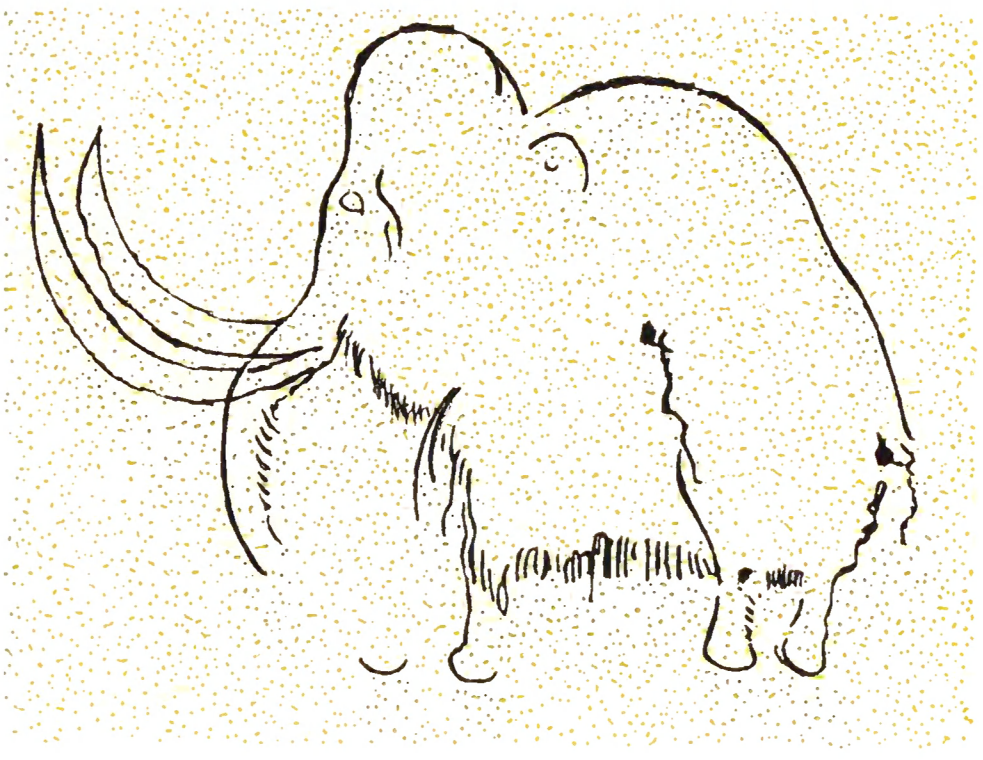


The wet clay was soft, and lines could easily be drawn on it. There were mostly three lines side by side, made by the three middle fingers. Some look casual, like those on the left, others more deliberate, as those below.



When it became generally warmer and the rivers disappeared from the caves, the lining of clay became dry and hard; often it was covered with an even harder and transparent layer of lime. This is why we can still see the impressions today.





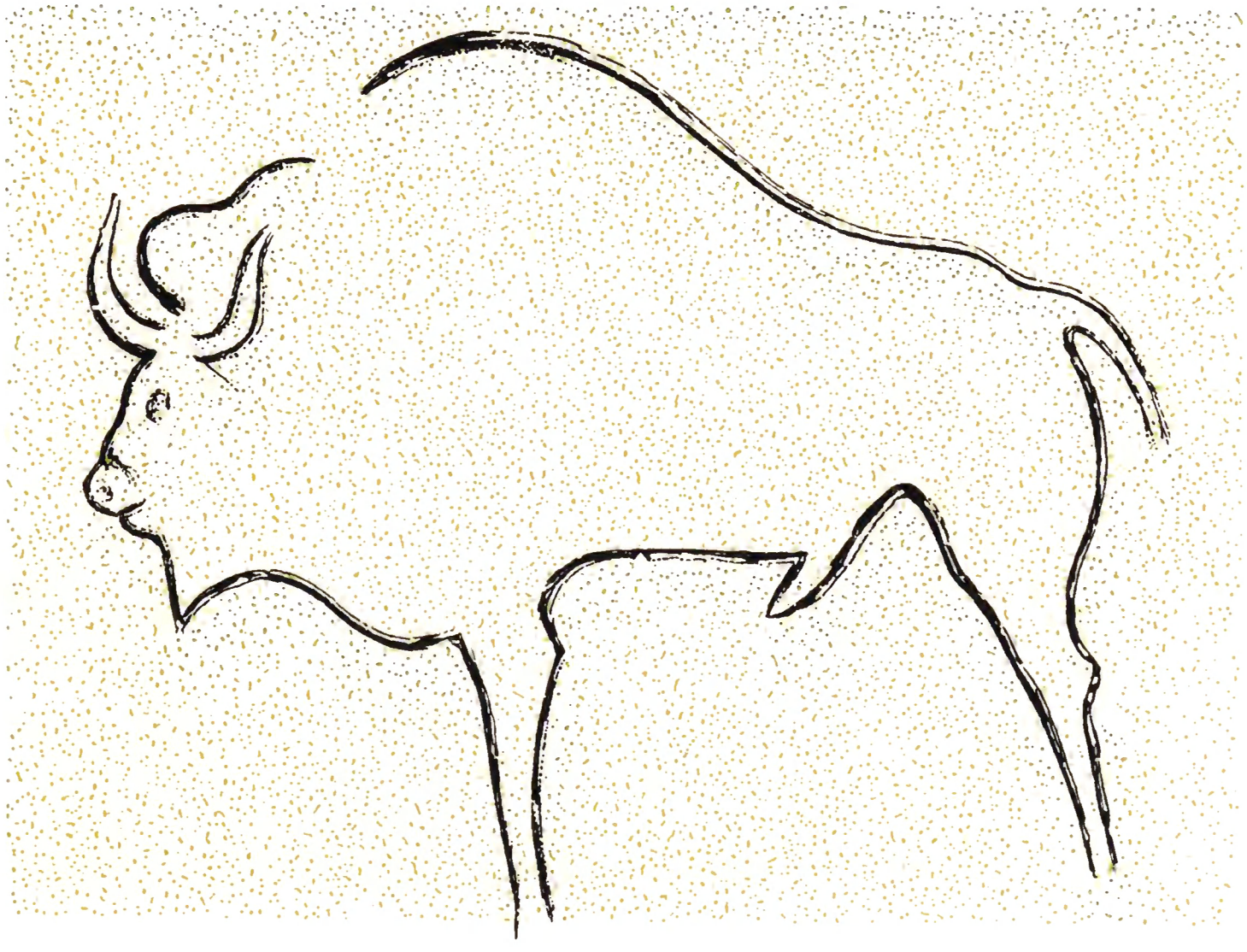
All men at those times were hunters. They knew all animals, those they had to avoid as well as those they wanted to hunt. They would recognise an animal even if they saw only a small part of it, be it a leg or the curve of its back.

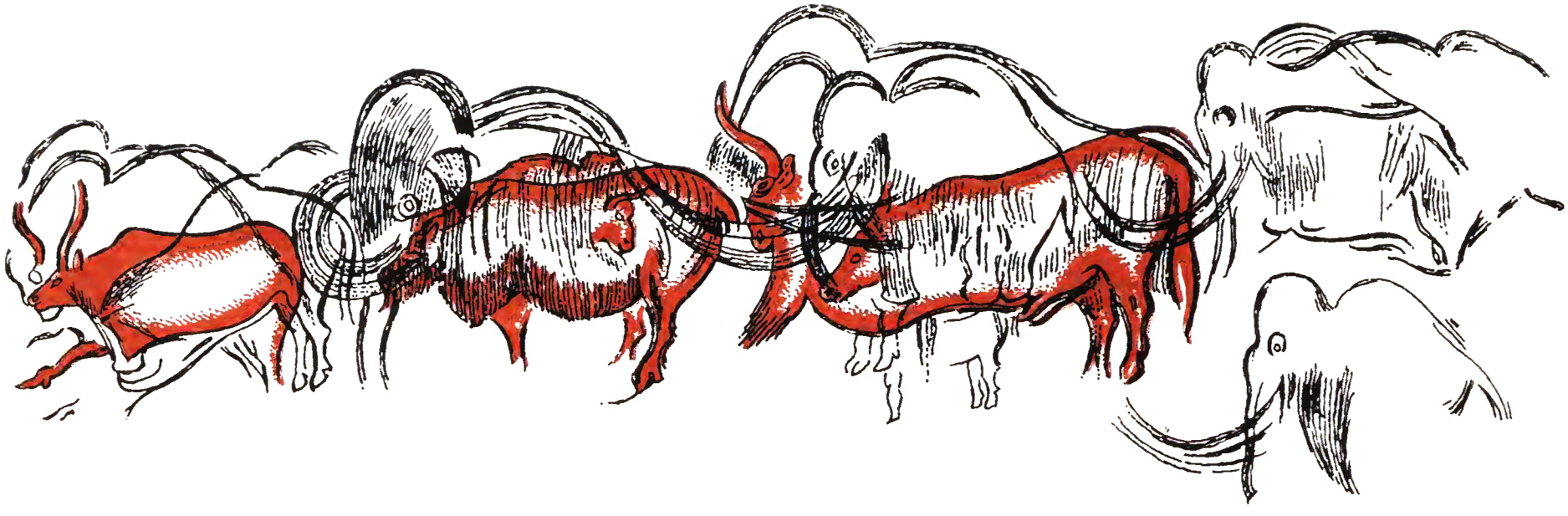
It could easily happen that a line they drew reminded them of an animal. They may have added something deliberately to make the resemblance even greater. The line at the top may have reminded them of a mammoth's back, head and trunk; another stroke across may have been added to give this mammoth its tusks.

From discovering likenesses to making them is still a long way, and this may have taken many generations. This happened, it is believed, about 25,000 years ago. Then these early hunters made striking portraits of animals.

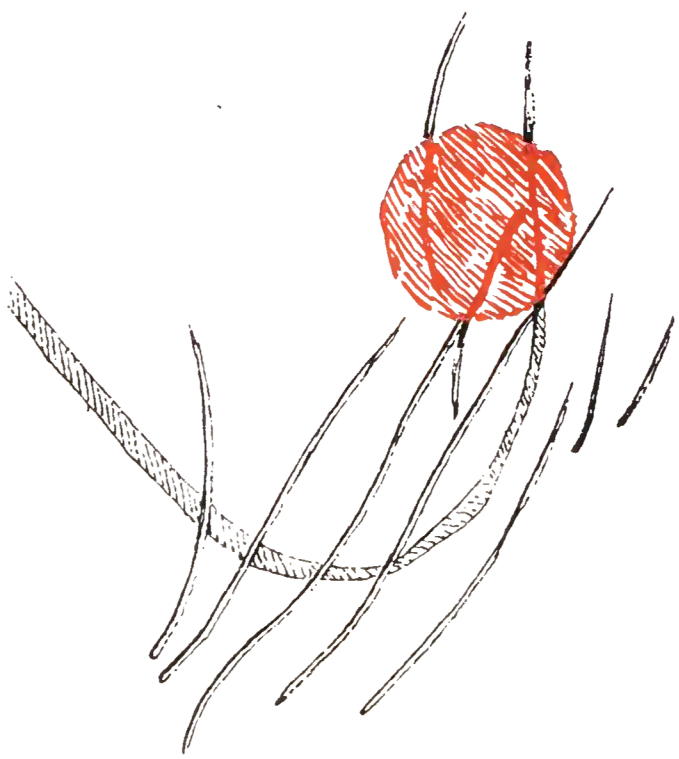
These pictures must have made a great impression: some men seemed to be able to create new life. And what was of greater importance for the hunters than more and more animals? Perhaps these artists were greatly honoured. Perhaps their work may have been significant in other ways. By giving new life to animals they may have protected the hunters against the revenge of killed animals. Or, by their pictures, they may have worked charms to make more animals appear, or to make future hunts succeed. We do not know what the hunters believed. We can only wonder why many of the pictures are deep down in dark parts of caves which can be reached only with difficulty, where there is no daylight and no fresh air, and where no people could have lived.

Below is the rock engraving of a bison. This animal became more important than the mammoth and survived for a much longer time.



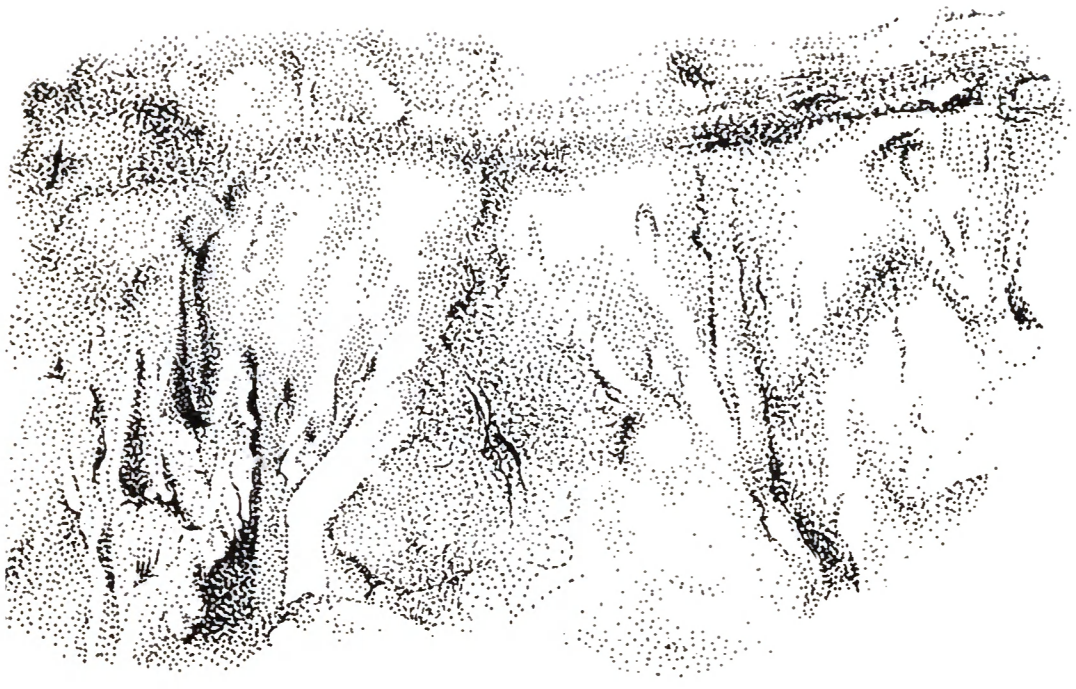


Pictures were now cut into rock with sharp stone engravers. Often, the same rock face was used again and again. This panel was first covered with mammoths and later with bison. It looks rather confusing. But perhaps for these people the making of pictures was more important than the looking at them afterwards. Sometimes we have to follow lines very carefully to understand what they represent. On the rough surfaces there are natural grooves which can mislead us. Sometimes there are also scratches made by claws of animals, as in the picture below.



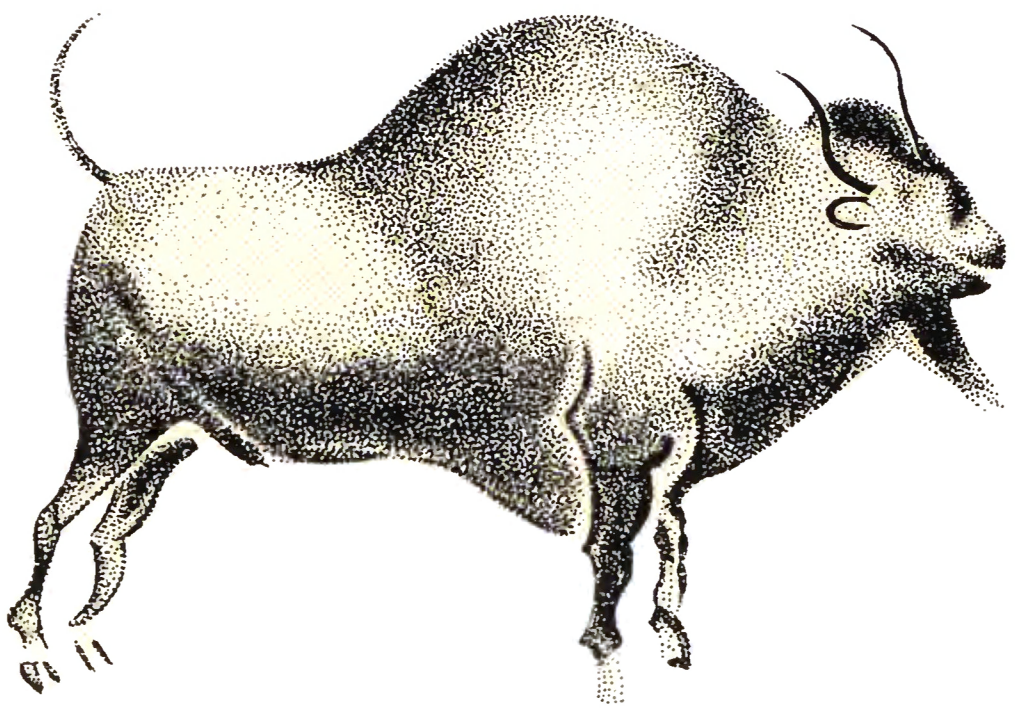
By looking closely, one can occasionally discover which of two crossing lines has been made earlier. In the example at the side an earlier line has been broken by an animal's scratchings, and a later patch of colour has partly filled in the scratches.

Often pictures were on parts of rock which could be reached by the artist either from the bottom or the side or a ledge above, and the drawn animals have their legs in all directions. Obviously, this is not the picture of a scene, but of single animals, drawn without any reference to the other pictures. One can find bison, wild horses, goats, a bear, and the antlers of a reindeer.



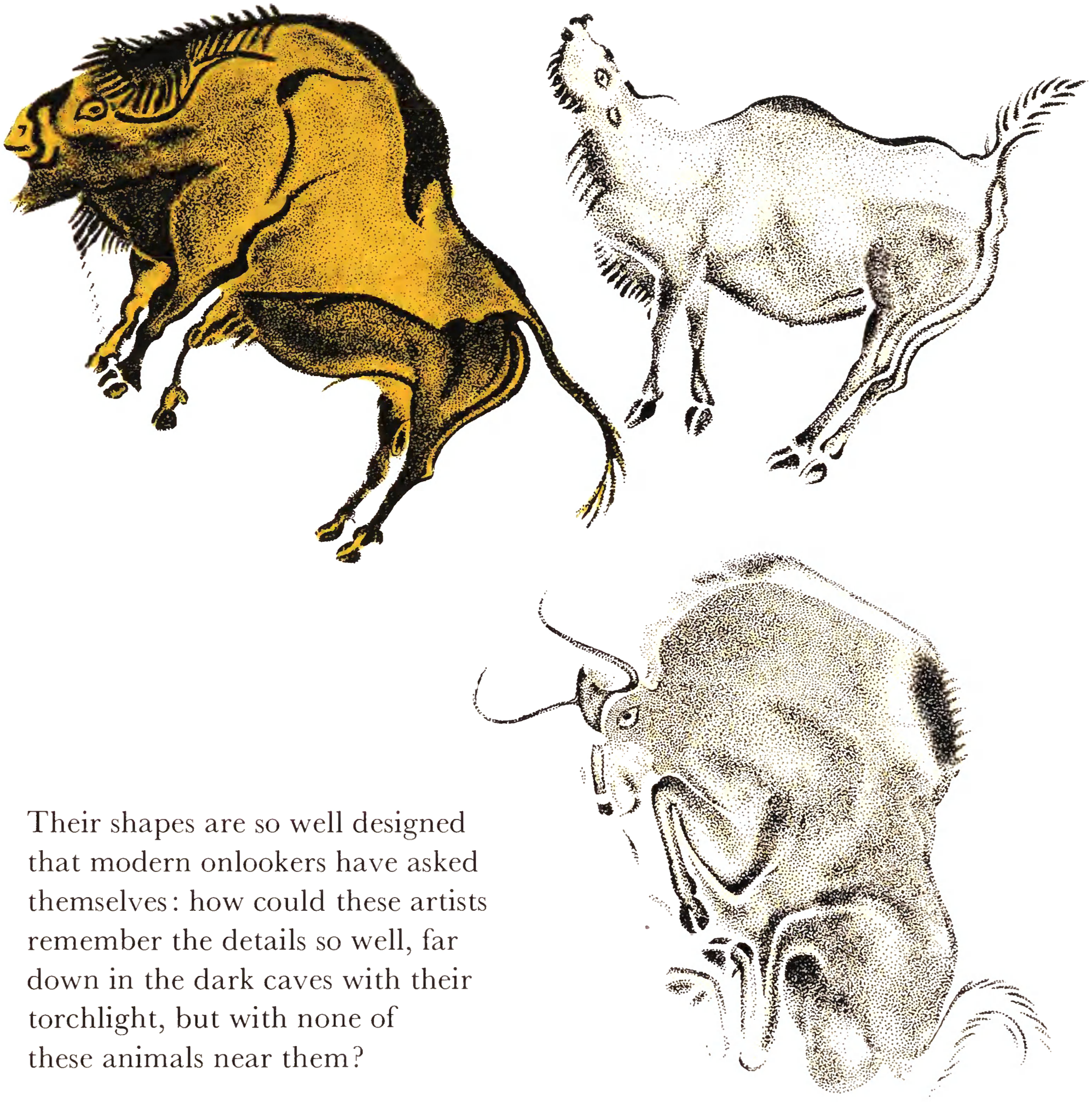
Sometimes, rocks seem to have the shape of some animal, and the hunter artists, with a bit of work, made the likeness even greater. This rock reminds us of the tail and the hindleg of a horse. Something which is rather faint was added to complete the horse.

Some of the most famous cave paintings of all have been found on the ceiling of a large, low, underground room in a Spanish cave. This ceiling has many outcrops of rock of various shapes, and these were used for making into bison.



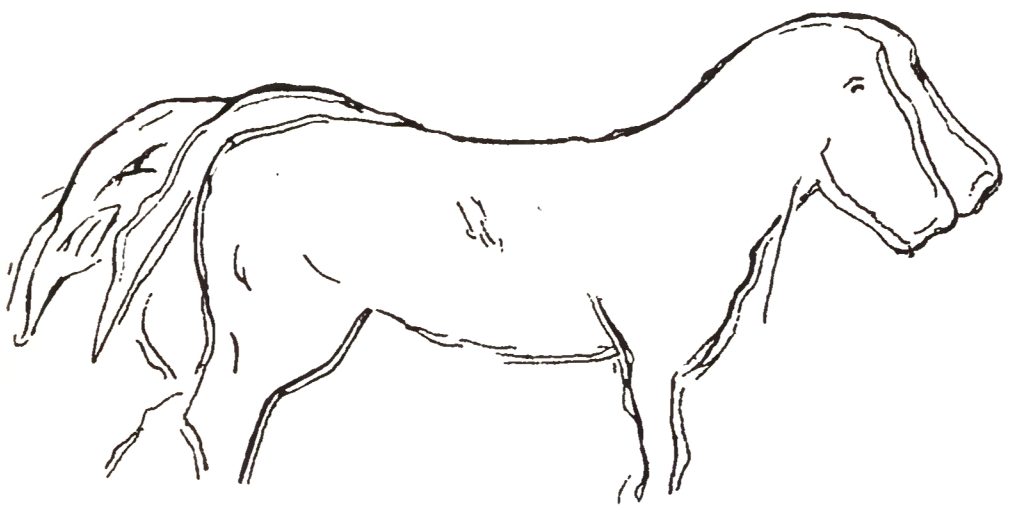
As the shape demands, these bison lie about in all directions, some with their legs stretched out as if lying, lifeless, on their side. Others have their legs curled up underneath them.

The bodies are covered over with yellow and red ochre, and shading helps to give them an even rounder appearance. Horns and tails are added with brushstrokes.



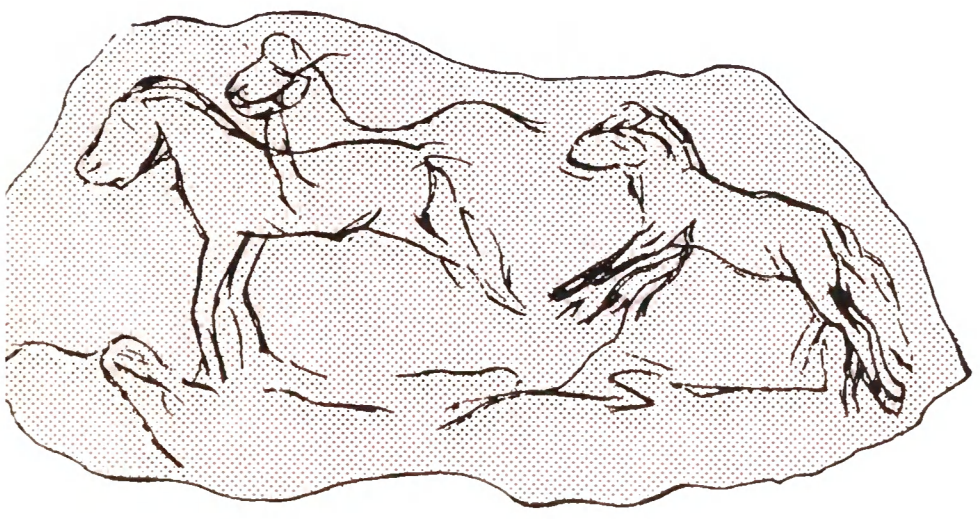
Their shapes are so well designed
that modern onlookers have asked
themselves: how could these artists
remember the details so well, far
down in the dark caves with their
torchlight, but with none of
these animals near them?

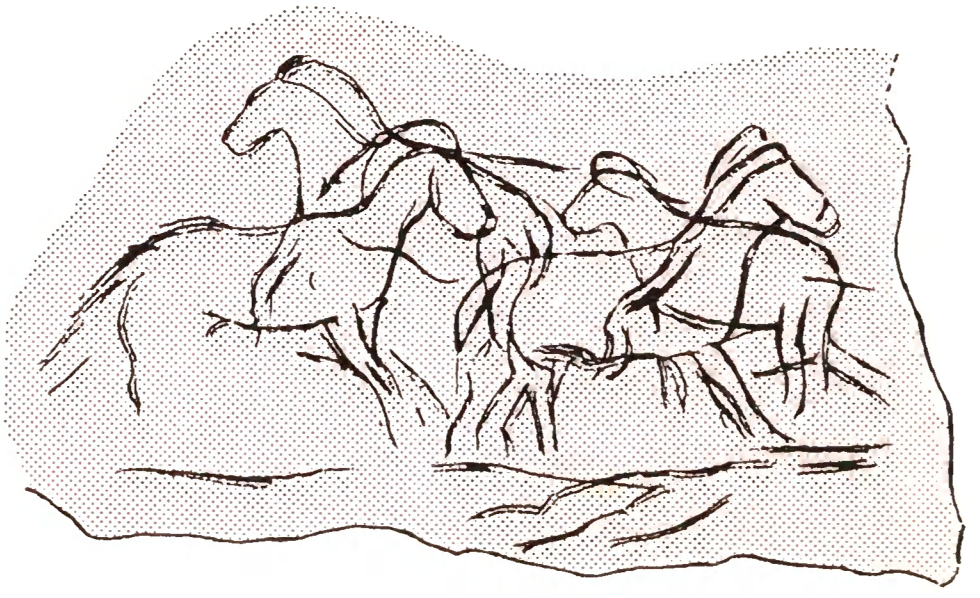
Perhaps the artists had drawn so many pictures already that they knew all the details by heart. Perhaps they had had a training. At one place, many sketches have been found which look as if a pupil had tried to draw an animal and a teacher had helped him to improve it. Some of these heads look rather vague, but one is drawn with a sure hand.

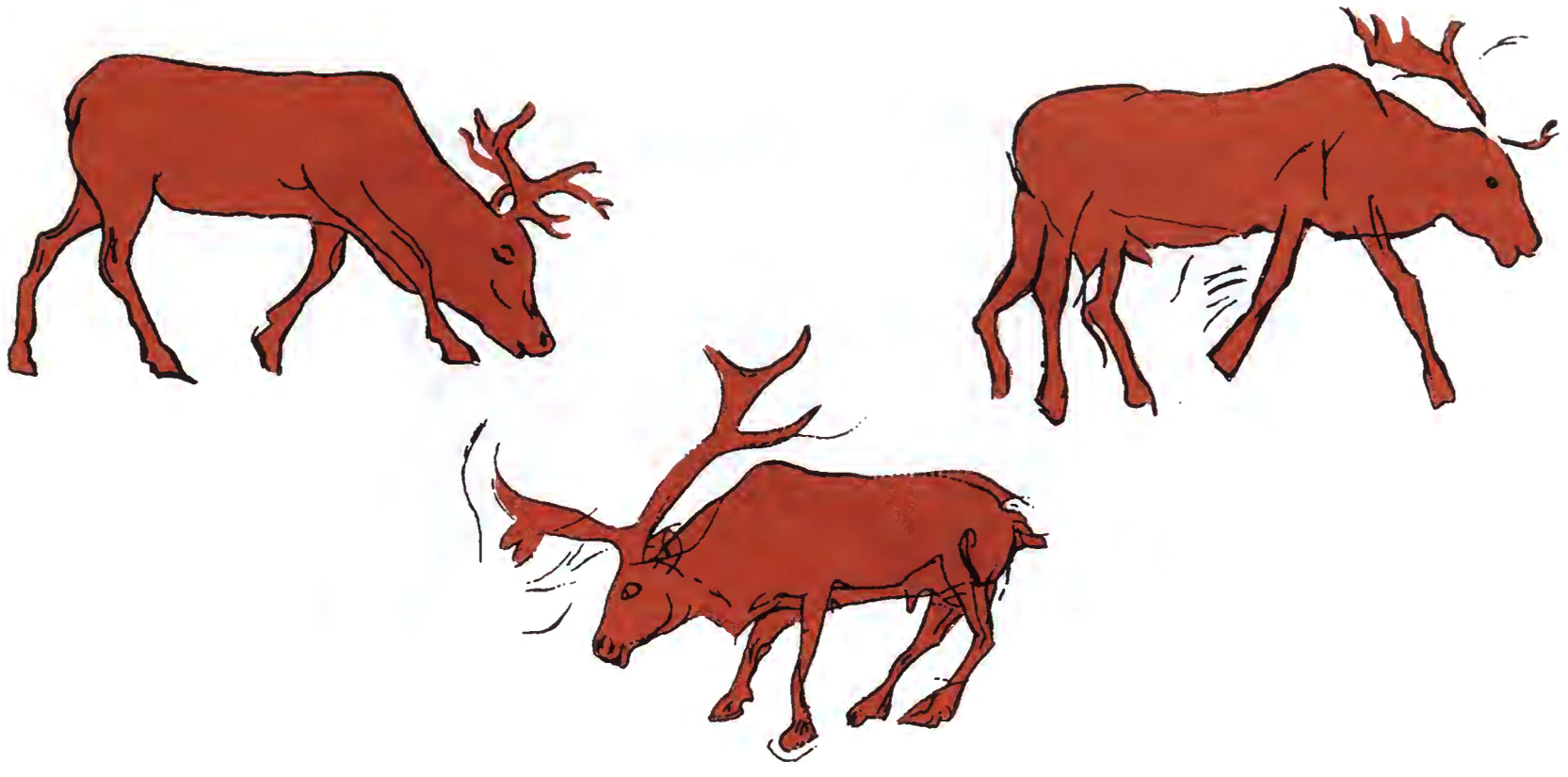


This body of a horse shows correcting lines.

In the end, the artists could draw animals in any movement, indicated by a few sketchy lines. These gambolling horses are full of life.

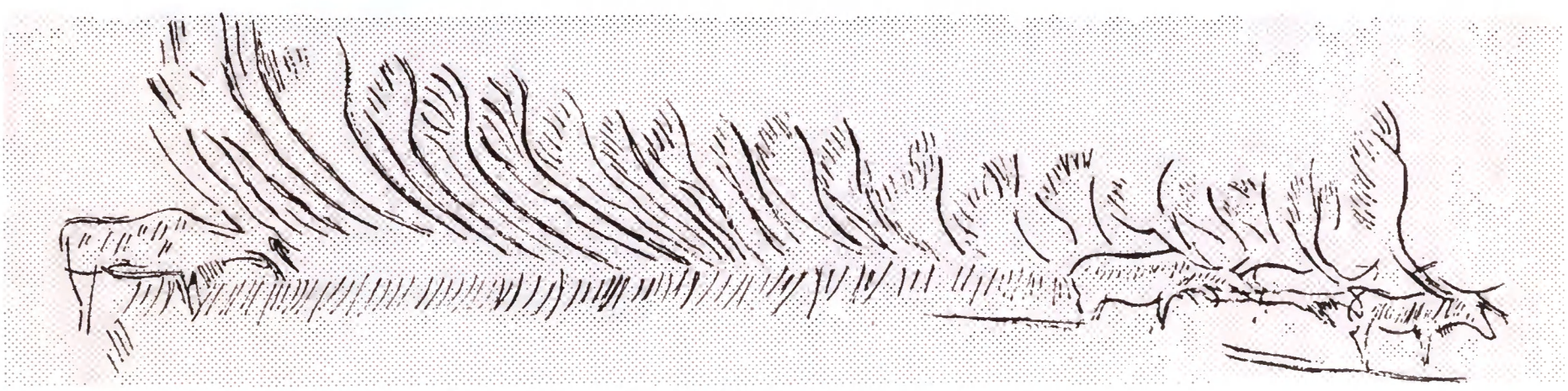


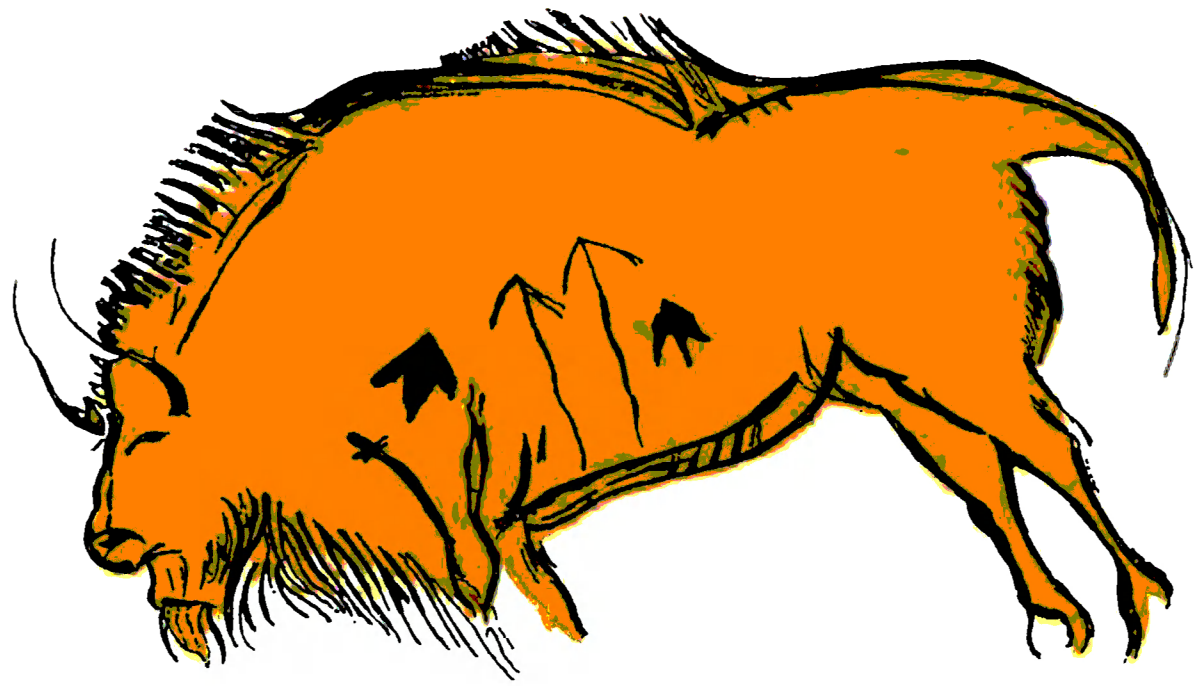




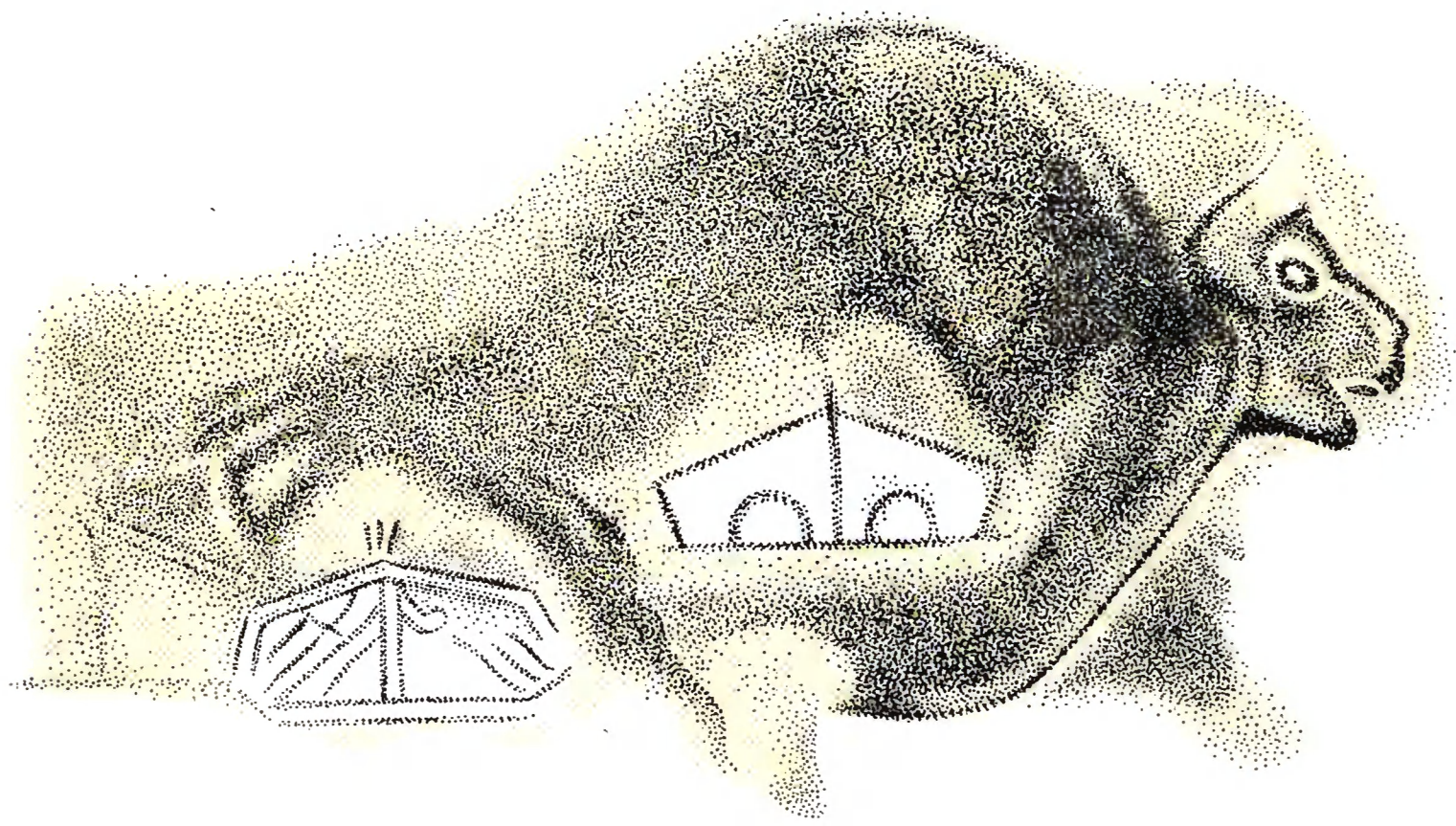
Reindeer also were represented in many positions: running, browsing and falling down. Reindeer became in fact the most important game of the people for a long time, when the climate again became colder in Europe, about 20,000 years ago, after they had been enjoying a warm period. The land became like a tundra, with few trees, and in winter the reindeer herds came far south to browse in the grasslands for food. The picture below gives an impression of the large herds in which they gathered together; it is copied from the engraving on a needle box, made of an eagle's bone.

In a hunt, such herds were rounded up; it is possible that dogs helped the hunters at an early date.





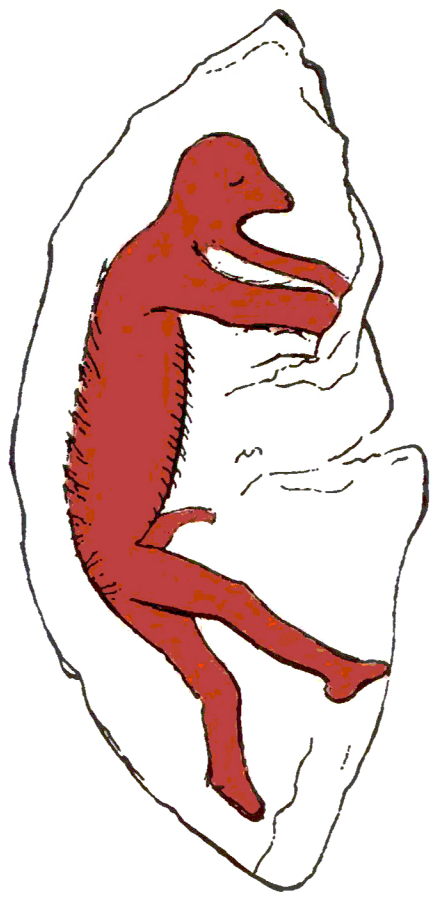
In some pictures one finds certain signs put on an animal design, but one never knows whether superimposed drawings have to be seen together or separately. The signs on the top picture look like spear heads to wound or kill an animal. But what are the signs put on the animal below? Some say these are traps; in the same way as the picture above should bring about a successful hunt, the one below should bring about the trapping of an animal.



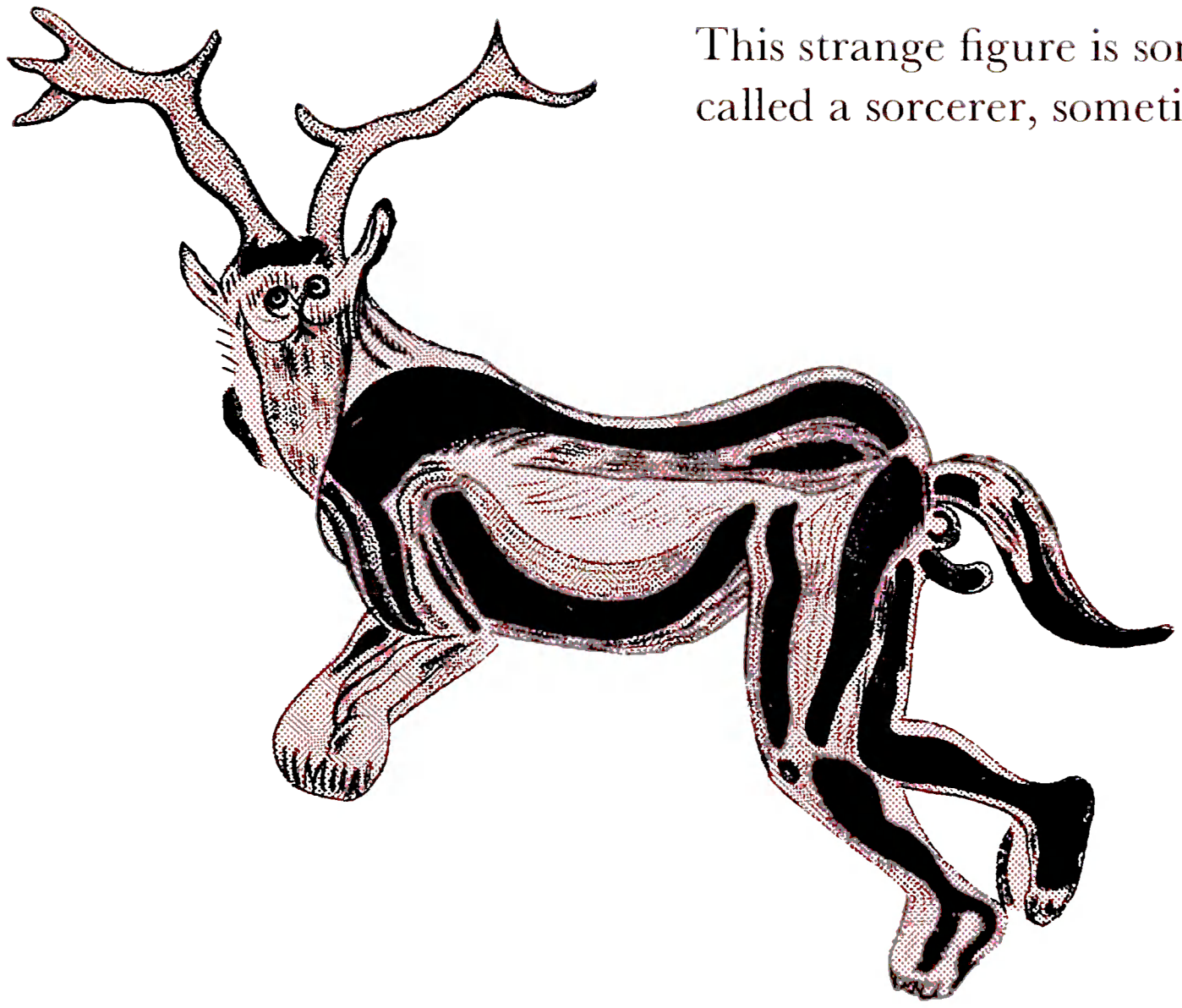
But people do not agree on the meaning of these hut-like signs. Some say they mean: this is a mother-animal. But how can we be sure? Some pictures in which these symbols occur look like a map or a landscape.

Is this a picture which tells a hunter the position of the traps and of the animals' tracks? There are still great mysteries about the life of these people who lived thousands of years ago. Did they ever build huts of branches and twigs for themselves, in areas where they could not find a cave or a rock shelter? In some places they certainly did. And in many places, under a roof of rock, they made walls of sticks and hides, to give them better protection against the wind.

Strangely enough, there are hardly any pictures of a man, and when he appears, he looks more like an animal. In this engraving, the shape of the feet can only belong to a man, but the head is certainly not human.

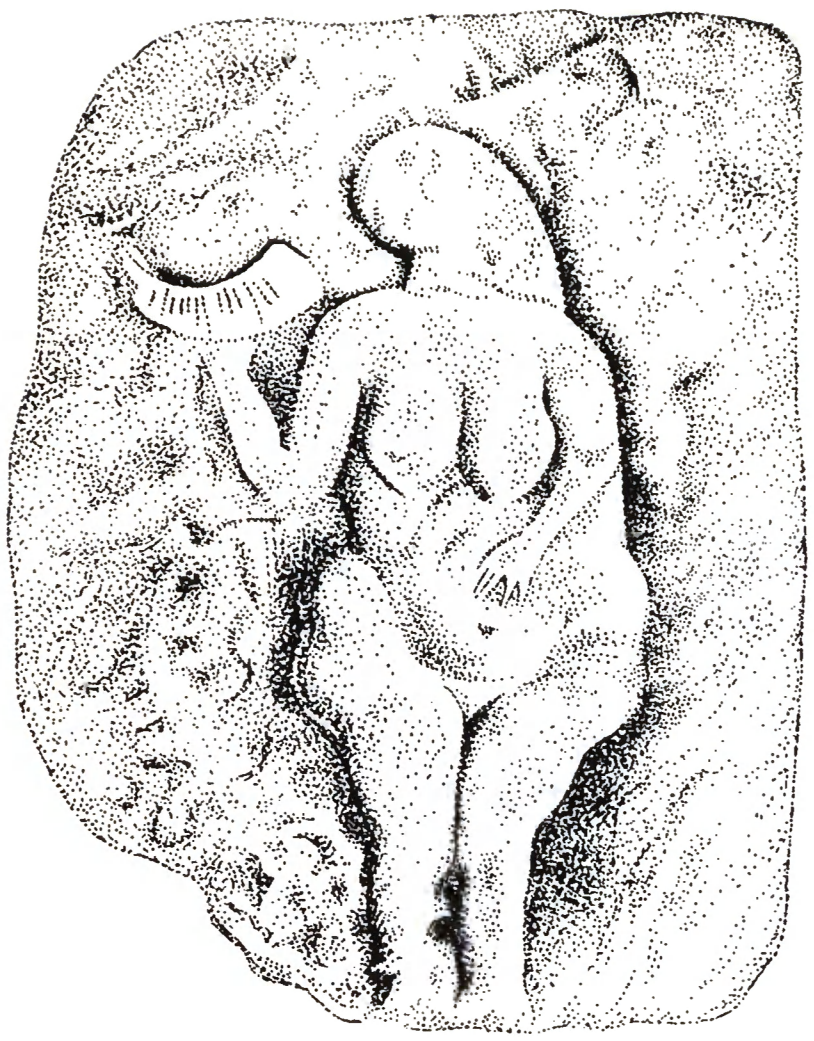


The same is true for the other pictures on these two pages. Did these men wear animal masks to deceive their game and get nearer them? Did they perform dances in animal disguise?



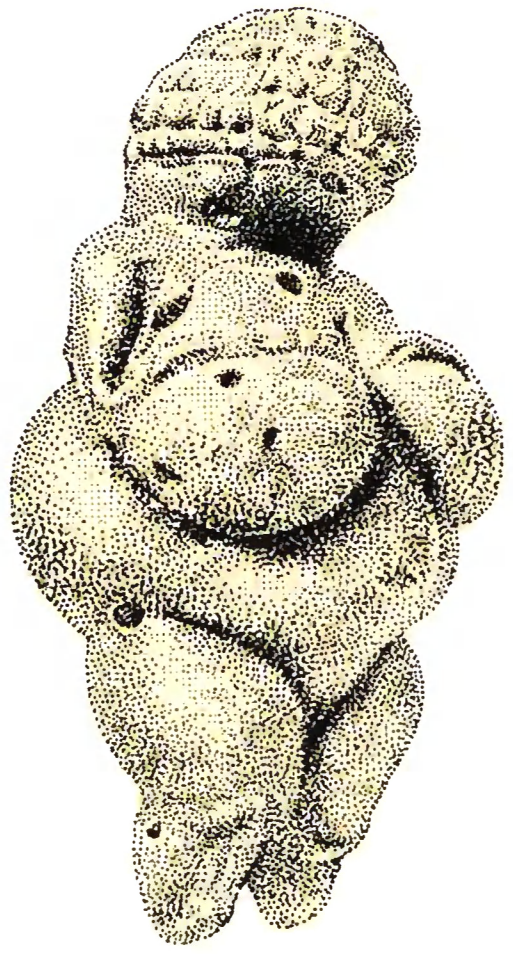
This strange figure is sometimes called a sorcerer, sometimes a god.

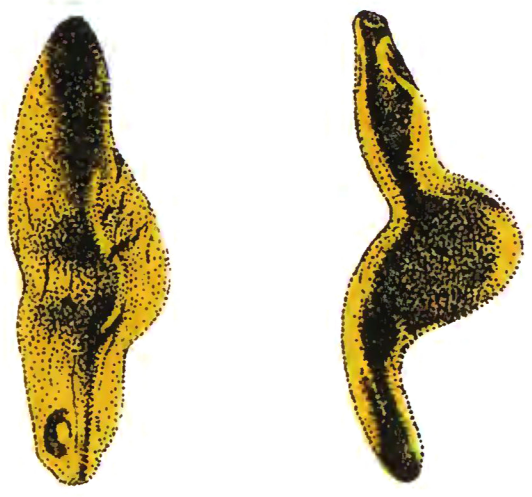
The eyes and feet are surely a man's, but around him is an animal's fur, and on his head the antlers of a stag. This picture was found in a prominent position in a large underground room in one of the caves, near some kind of chancel, as if rituals were held here. Sometimes foot impressions are found in such rooms, as if dances had been performed. A hunter's luck is always uncertain; it is not impossible that these early hunters tried to do something to improve their luck – paint pictures, sing and dance. Nobody can tell. But there are still peoples living today whose young men perform dances with antlers on their heads. Some of our own customs and beliefs, which cannot be explained, may have their beginnings in times long past.



Their feet are hardly ever carved; perhaps such figures were made to be put in the ground. Whether this was to help to bring in more food, nobody knows. Only in later times, when people had herds and fields, such a figure was called a "fertility goddess".

The pictures of women of these early times, which have been found, are quite different from those of men. Some are carved on one surface of a stone. Others are complete little figures, carved from mammoth ivory. The women are fat and short, their faces hardly show. They were probably the pride of their menfolk who brought plenty of food home.



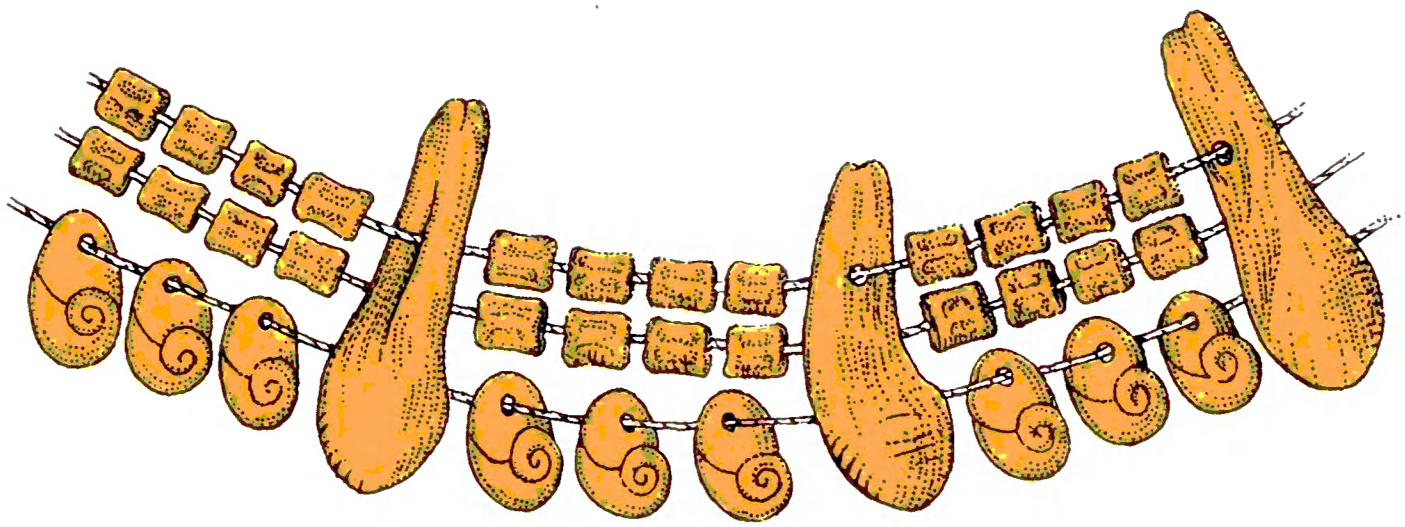


Even these small ivory ornaments or amulets have a shape which reminds us vaguely of a woman's form.

On the other hand, this girl's head, cut in ivory, is of great charm, even for us today.

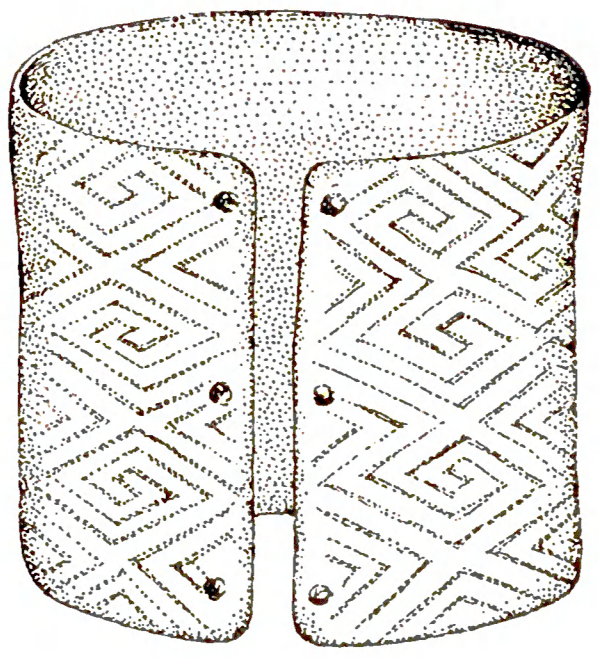
Some of the ornaments which these early people wore would also please us today.

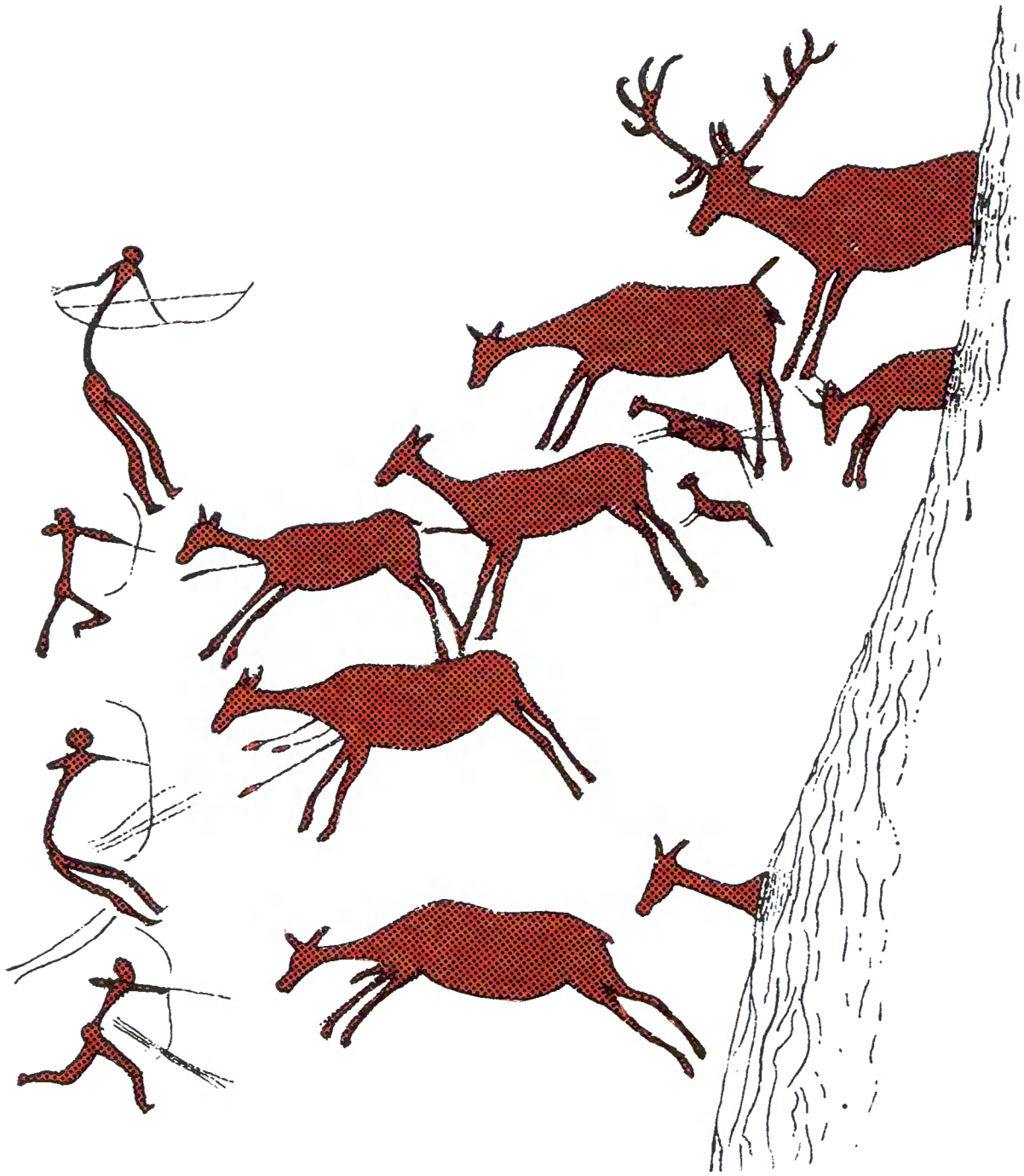
Here are a necklace and a bracelet.



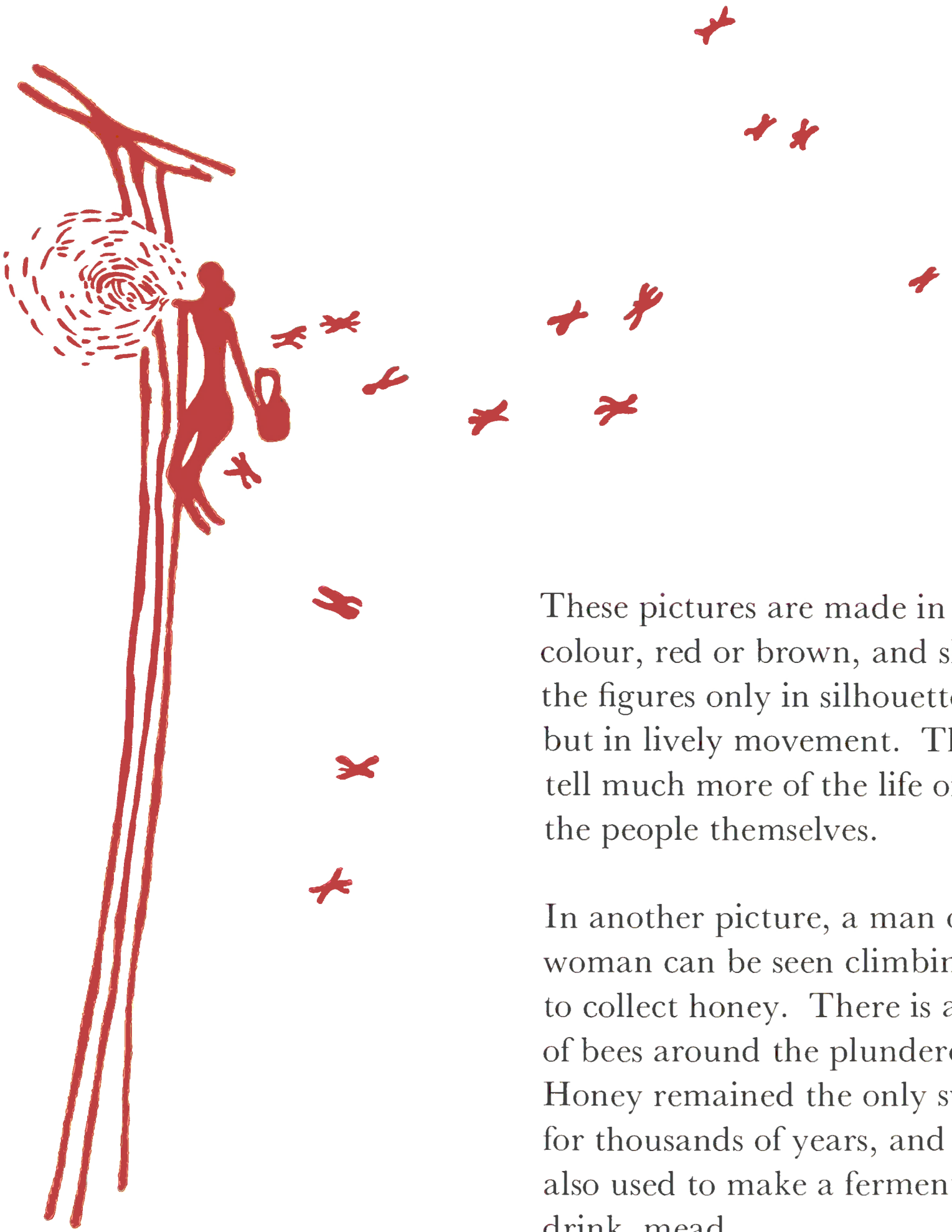
In those times, men and women wore finery in the same way.

The bracelet is covered with the design of the maze which was so popular in Ancient Crete and Greece. It is strange to see that it was already used so much earlier.



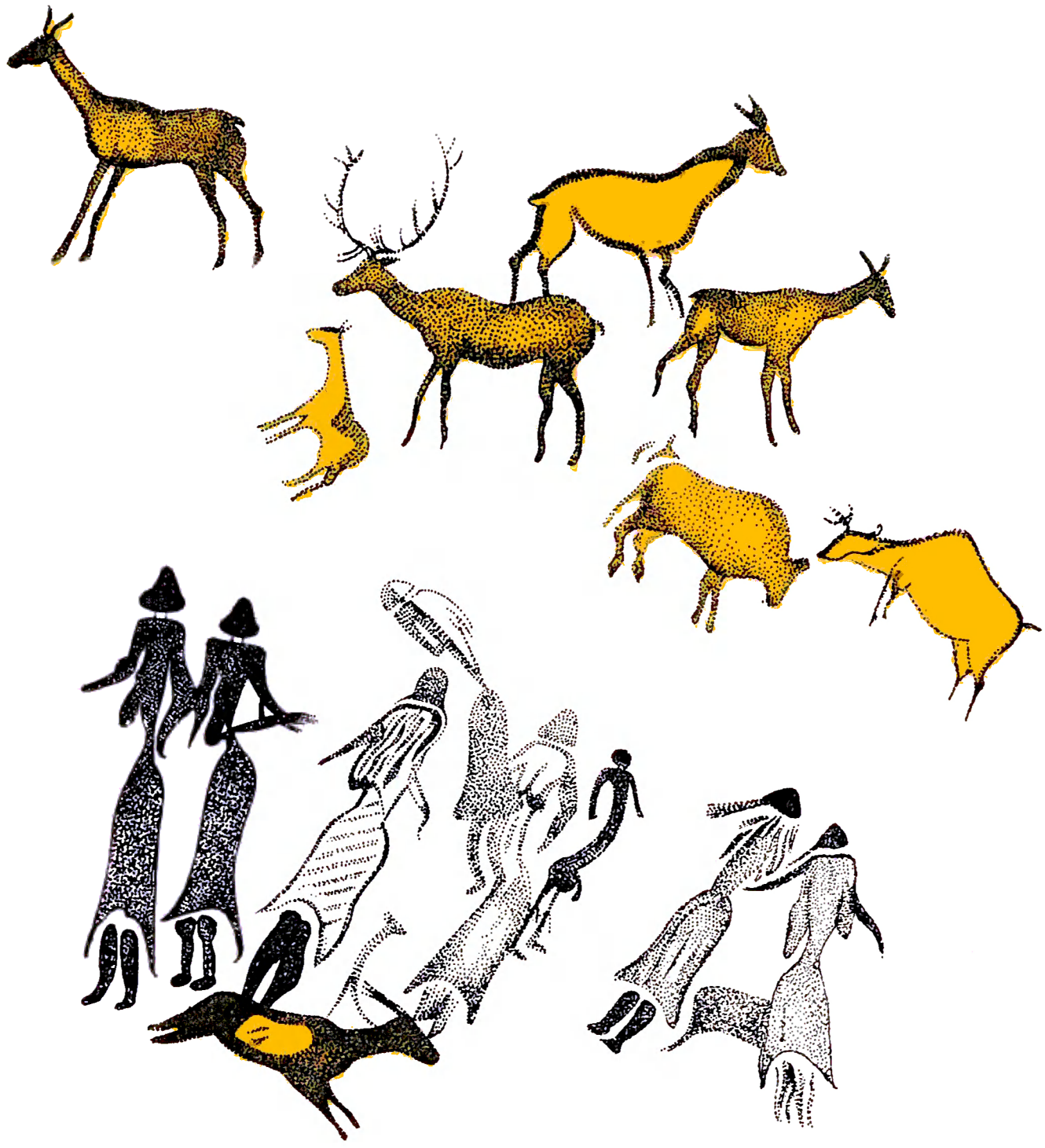


In Africa, too, the new people had arrived. There was more rain, and therefore more plant and animal life in what is now the great desert of the Sahara. People who lived there made pictures on rock faces too, but in a different way. When it became warmer again in Europe, these people went from North Africa to what is now Spain, which was still linked with Africa by land where now the straits of Gibraltar are. The whole scene had now changed, forest replaced the tundra, and the reindeer had retired to northern areas. In the pictures these people made, about 9000 years ago, men and women play a much larger part; they can be seen together with animals, as in this hunting scene: men are shooting with bows and arrows at the deer.

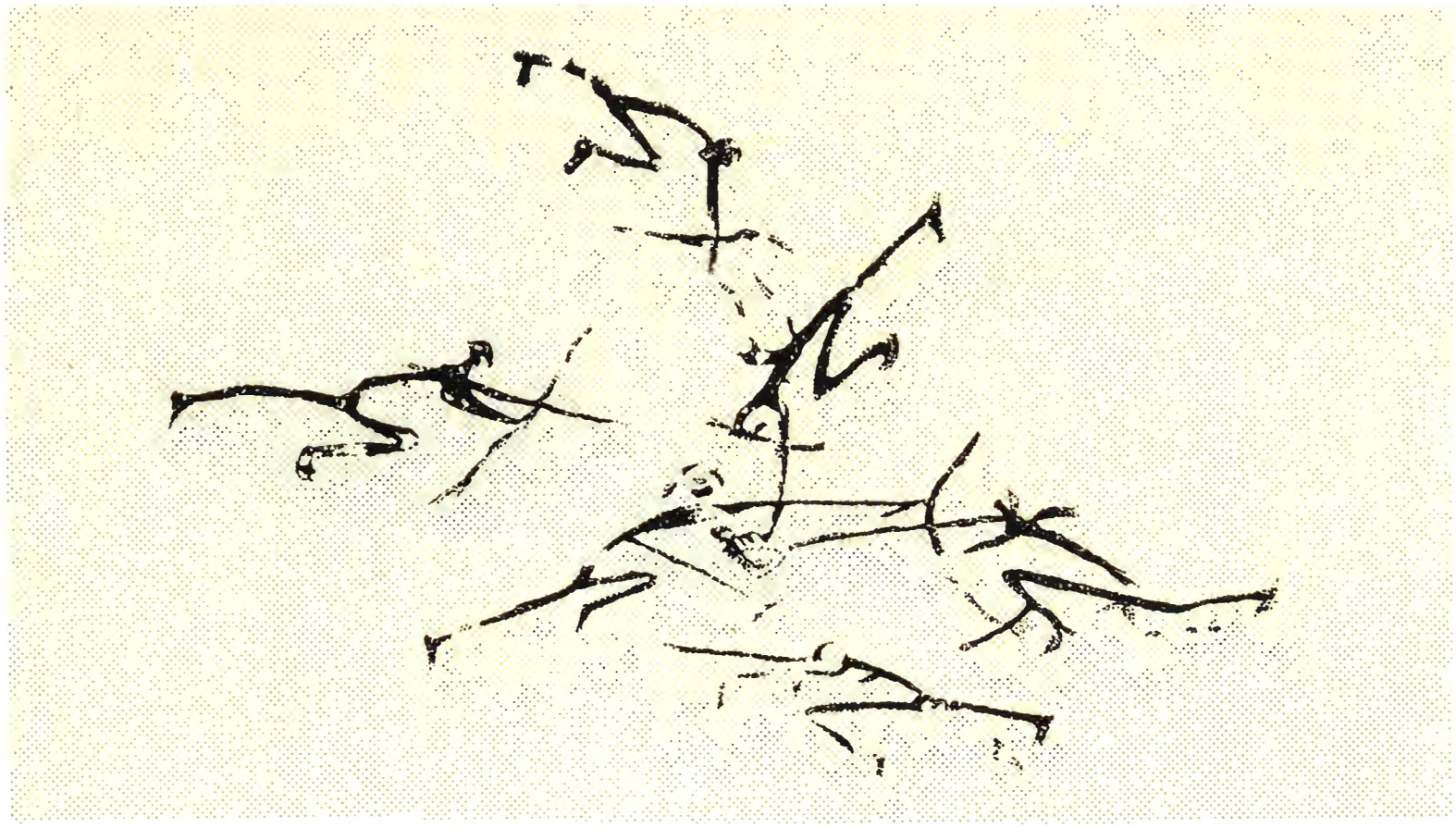


These pictures are made in one colour, red or brown, and show the figures only in silhouette, but in lively movement. They tell much more of the life of the people themselves.

In another picture, a man or a woman can be seen climbing ropes to collect honey. There is a swarm of bees around the plundered nest. Honey remained the only sweetener for thousands of years, and it was also used to make a fermented drink, mead.

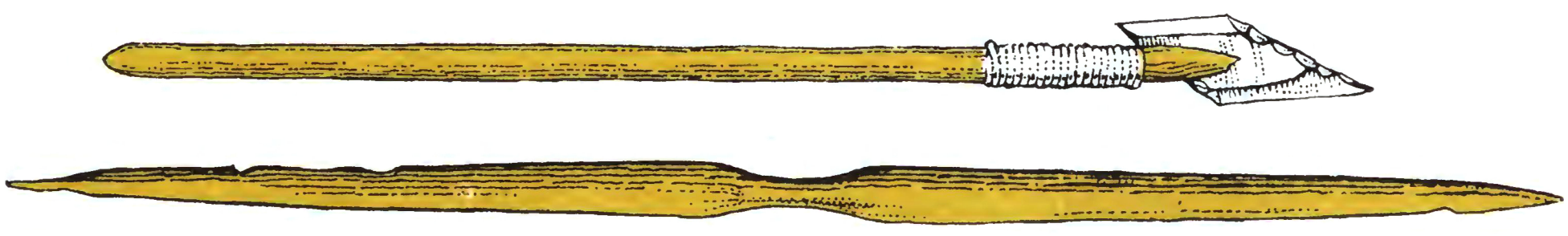


Not only men but also women are shown in groups. In this picture the women, wearing loose skirts, seem to be partaking in some common activity, dance, sport or ritual. One of them can be seen floating in mid-air, as if she had jumped from the back of the animal in the foreground. Is this perhaps the beginning of the bull sport in which later the women of Crete took part? Perhaps these people had learned to catch some wild animals alive for their games or rituals.

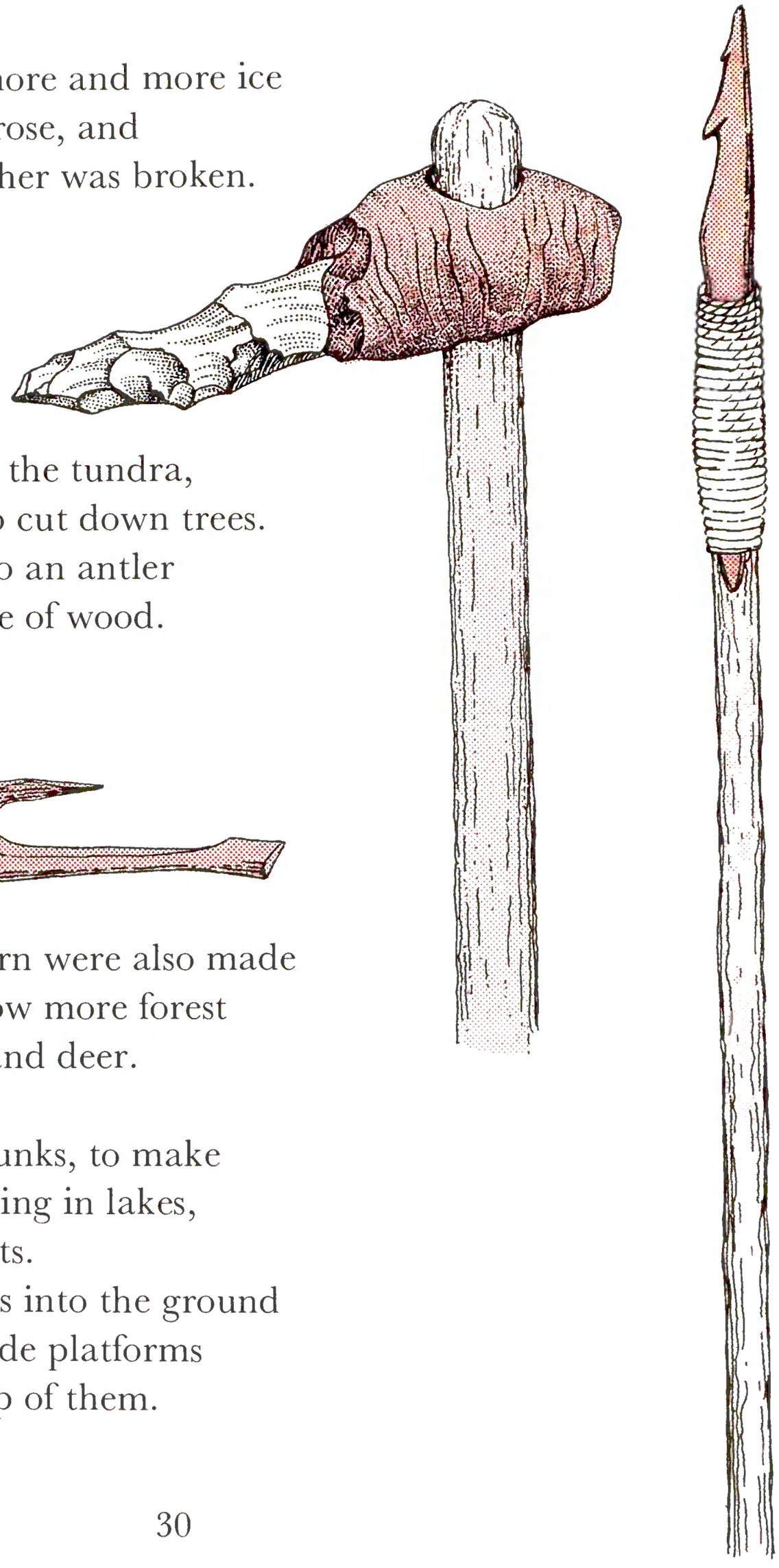


There are some pictures which show men shooting at other men. They use bows and arrows as if they were shooting animals. Perhaps two groups of hunters wanted to hunt in the same places, and they knew no better way to deal with this problem than that used by fish and birds, who fight for the area where they feed. Men had to live through many more conflicts until they learned to listen to a council of elders who found wiser ways.

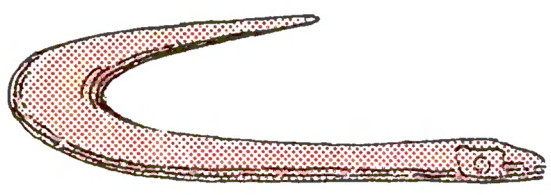
Weapons were now dangerous enough if they hit a man. Small sharp stones were carefully fitted to the shafts of arrows. Bows were shaped out of strong and supple wood, with a grip for the hand in the middle, and incisions at the ends where the string was to be fixed.

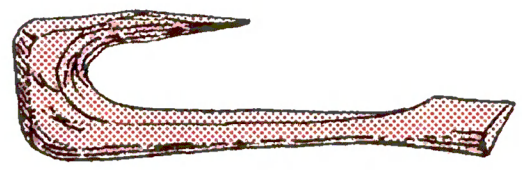


When it became warmer, more and more ice
melted, the level of the sea rose, and
one land bridge after the other was broken.



When dense forest replaced the tundra,
people needed more tools to cut down trees.
They fitted sharp stones into an antler
which they fixed to a handle of wood.





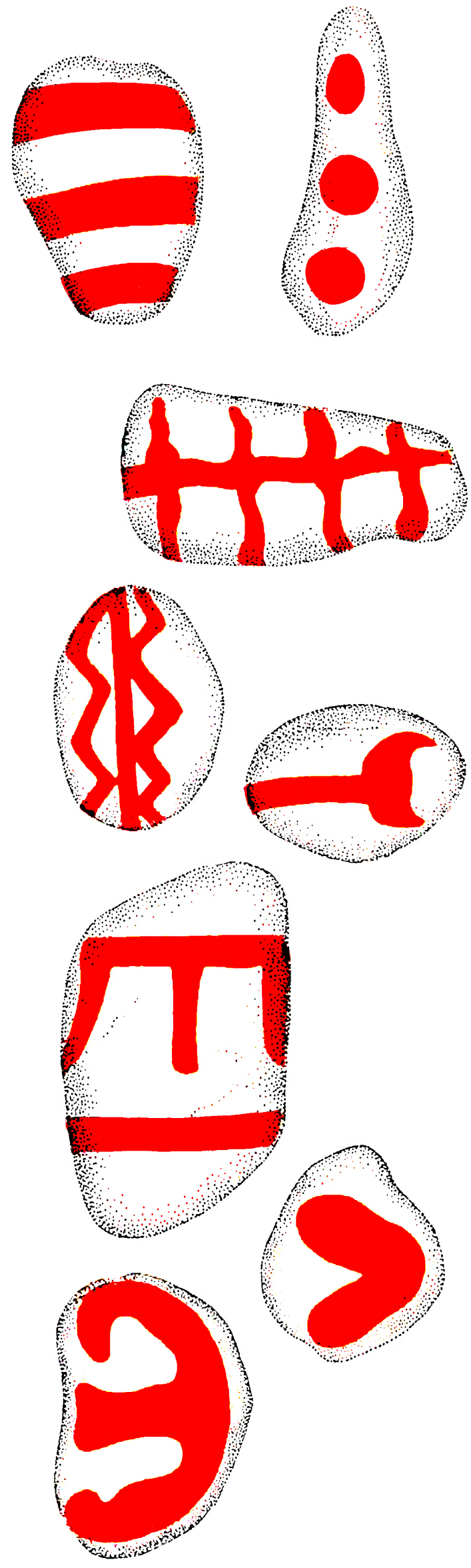
Fish hooks and spears of horn were also made
at this time. There were now more forest
animals to hunt, like boar and deer.

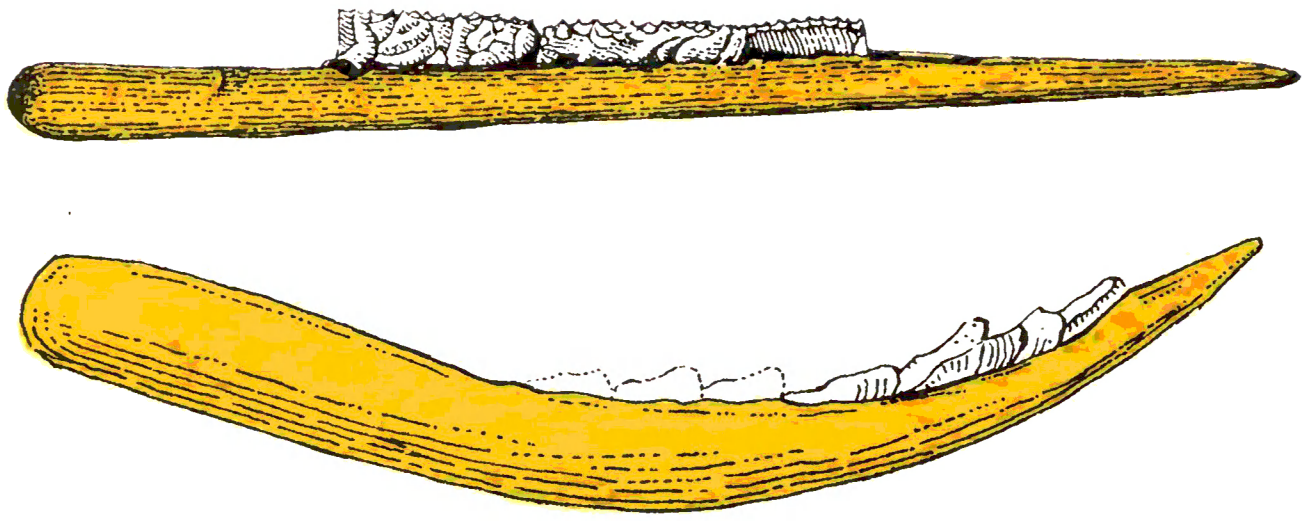
People hollowed out tree trunks, to make
simple boats to do their fishing in lakes,
and to cross rivers and straits.
They even drove tree trunks into the ground
at the edge of lakes and made platforms
to build wooden huts on top of them.

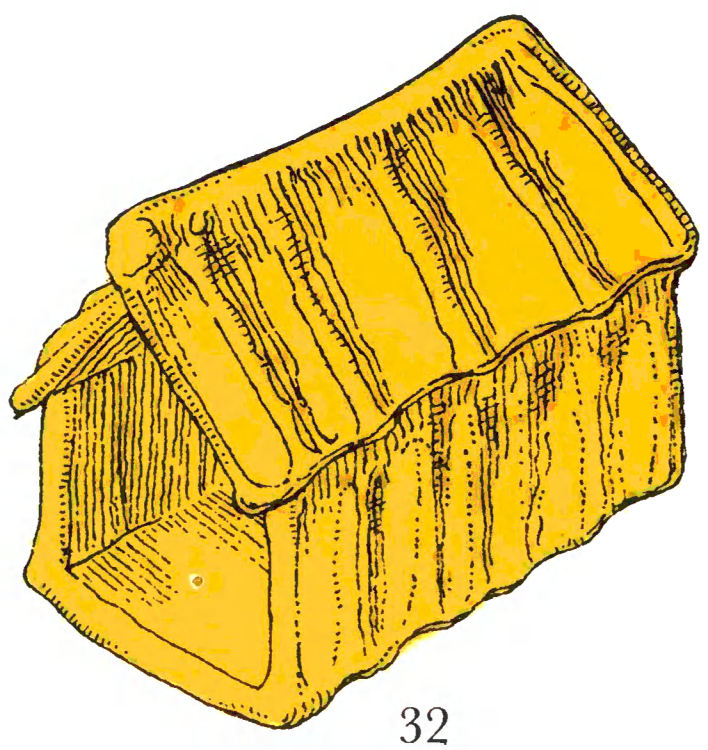
Animal pictures lost their importance. Instead, people made other pictures: on small, smooth pebbles they painted signs which look like numbers or letters. Were they something like coins, or amulets? Nobody knows.

Their use did not spread widely from the area where they were found, in the south of France. The people who, centuries later, devised signs for numbers, words or sounds, had certainly never seen them.

For us, they are one of the signals that the times brought great changes in the fortunes of mankind. One of the most fundamental changes was indeed approaching, again from the east: somewhere in Western Asia people had begun to grow their food in fields and to breed and keep animals.





Farmers needed new tools to cut the stalks of their grain-bearing grasses. They made them out of small, sharp stones held in a piece of antler. These were the first sickles.

From now on, people did not live where they could find game or fish, but where they had good soil for growing crops or grazing animals. They began to live in houses, in villages and towns, near such fields. From now on man did not only observe how animals lived and moved about, he also watched how plants grew. He had to learn about the seasons, he had to think ahead and save some grain for sowing. He now polished his stone tools – the New Stone Age had begun.